Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
Illust. An2A

My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World

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Humanity's extinction happens during summer vacation?!

Yoriko said as she splashed Aiko with seawater.
"What can you do?" Aiko asked.
"It's how things ended up."
Aiko followed Yoriko's gaze to where Yuichi and Kanako sat on the vinyl sheet. They were on Team: Suntan Oil Application.
"THERE! WHAT ABOUT THAT? HEY, NORO! HEY! HEY!"
My Big Sister
LIVES IN A
FANTASY WORLD
HUMANITY'S EXTINCTION HAPPENS DURING SUMMER VACATION?!
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Yuichi's classmate.
She's actually a vampire.
Aiko Noro
Yuichi's classmate.
She's actually a serial killer.
Natsuki Takeuchi
Yoriko Sakaki
Yuichi's little sister.
In her second year of middle school.
She loves her big brother.
"W-WAIT... ARE YOU... TALKING ABOUT..."
"SAKAKI HAS SQUEEZED MINE."
"YOU'RE COZYING UP TO MY BROTHER, AREN'T YOU?"
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SO WE NEED A BREAST SIZE COMPARISON!
-MUTSUKO
Orihara Kanako
Vice president of the survival club.
Obsessed with isekai.

Prologue: Even More Suspicious People

Furu cocked her head at the outrageous claim. She wasn't sure if that was supposed to be impressive, and she couldn't figure out why the girl was bringing it up now.

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Prologue: Even More Suspicious People

The light clink of metal broke the silence of the pier at night.

It was the sound of a sheng biao penetrating a shipping container.

A sheng biao was a Chinese weapon that consisted of a sharp dart tied to a rope. At the other end of the rope was a boy, his body poised in a throwing motion.

The boy had no distinguishing characteristics. His face was attractive, in an average sort of way, and if you took your eyes off of him for a second, he'd fade completely from your memory. The T-shirt and messenger shorts that he wore were completely unexceptional clothing for a summer night, as well.

Beside him stood a girl in miko garb, who was staring incredulously at the place the sheng biao had hit.

"Leader, you're tying ropes to those?" the miko asked, making small talk. Her name was Furu Shinomiya, and she was puzzled as to why her leader had called her out.

"Yeah, I've been doing that lately. Like, going to fetch them every time gets annoying, right?" The boy she called Leader gave the rope a light tug. The dart returned to his hand, his prey impaled on the blade.

It was a lizard-like creature in most respects, but it had only one eye — a large, compound one — and a slimy, exposed musculature rather than skin.

With a confident smile, Leader showed the twitching lizard's body to the girl.

"Eek!" Furu drew back.

"What's with the freak-out? We see these things all the time," Leader asked, baffled. Their job as monster hunters was to pursue devils, demons, and evil spirits of this sort. He would have expected Furu to be accustomed to low-level riff-raff like this by now.

"N-No way," she stammered. "Not slimy things like that!"

“That’s a surprise. You always seem so detached about your work.” Leader crushed the lizard in his hand. It immediately dispersed, without a trace left behind.

“You claim we see them all the time, but I’ve *never* seen one like that before,” Furu snapped back, seeming to regain her composure once the lizard was gone.

“This particular type is new. Her presence seems to have drawn them here from someplace far away... A foreign strain, I guess.” Leader began to walk.

Furu followed. “Her... you mean, the vampire princess?”

She was the main topic of conversation among monster hunters at the moment. Rumors had been spreading that the vampire princess had appeared in Seishin City, and they were sounding plausible. It was those rumors that had brought Leader and Furu here, to a pier at the south of Seishin City.

“‘Out of the frying pan, into the fire,’ as they say,” he replied. “The vampire incident is resolved, and we immediately get something far worse. You think it was a mistake to let them handle it?”

“You think those people had something to do with this?” Furu’s face twisted in distaste, thinking back to a few days ago, when that high school-aged boy and his friends had taken them all down without breaking a sweat.

“Most likely. They were certainly tough, but a lot of that was that they were fighting humans like us.”

“I know! I mean, why would you use a stun gun?!” Furu burst out.

Furu had been hit by the stun gun which had knocked her unconscious. It must have been modified; there was no way a consumer product would have that kind of output.

“I hear you,” Leader agreed. “It means they were training to fight other humans. Anyway, even if they are tough, they’re still only human. There’s no way they could beat a vampire that had reached its second stage.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Furu said. “I had a feeling we’d have to clean up after them.”

Two humans, an oni, and a minor vampire. The consensus of the assembled monster hunters was that that group wasn’t especially powerful, and probably couldn’t have handled it themselves.

“So they must have enlisted the aid of a higher being,” Leader said. “I don’t know how they went about it... but as a result, we now have a vampire princess hanging out in Seishin City.” This put the hunters in a dangerous position, as the vampire princess’s presence seemed to be agitating monster activity. “Anyway, that’s why we’re stuck hanging around here.”

“So... I don’t know exactly what we came to do, but shouldn’t we have brought Takachi?” Furu asked.

As usual, Leader had simply breezed into Furu’s house, said, “We got a job,” and brought her along.

“Takachi will be out of action for a while,” Leader said. “He was hurt badly.”

Akira Takachi. He was the strongest physical fighter of the Harukaze Yoiya, Leader’s gang, but he had broken a rib in the incident the other day.

That big gorilla, taking time off because of one little cracked rib? Furu snorted internally. On the other hand, to put someone like him out of commission, it must have been a serious injury.

“What about you, Leader? You broke a leg, didn’t you?” she asked.

Like Takachi, Leader had been injured during the fight with the mysterious boy in the abandoned hospital.

“It’s not so bad that I can’t walk on it,” Leader shrugged. “Though I probably couldn’t fight.”

“Uh?” Furu turned pale at the thought of having to fight herself. Her usual role was as rear support for the other two. Front line fighting wasn’t in her nature, and she wasn’t especially strong.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “The one we’ve come here to see... it sounds like it’s unlikely we could beat it, even if we were in top shape. We’d have to negotiate either way, and your power will come in handy there.”

“Couldn’t you have told me this earlier, at least?” Furu complained. Furu served as a monster hunter out of a sense of justice, and she would aggressively stick her nose in whenever supernatural creatures were obviously involved. Even so, she still didn’t like being dragged out under false pretenses.

“I think this is the place. Looks like it hasn’t arrived yet.” Leader stopped at the corner of the pier.

Despite the new moon that night, it was surprisingly light out, due to the street lights.

In front of them was dark ocean. There was nothing else of note there, as far as they could see.

Furu expanded her consciousness to encompass their immediate surroundings. That was her special ability: the location and analysis of enemies.

She immediately noticed a presence. A mass of tremendous power was coming towards them from the sea to the south.

"Leader!"

But no sooner did Furu shout out her warning than the threat came flying out of the ocean.

Leader focused his gaze on a black heap illuminated by an orange street lamp. "Ah, that's not good. I was hoping we could kill it, which would speed things up... but that's not looking possible."

The heap shook, drenching the area around it with droplets of water. It was just like a dog.

But this was no dog. It was too big to be a dog, and what was more, the silhouette was human.

Furu didn't even have to analyze it. Anyone with a brain would know what it was.

A werewolf.

A human-like beast, with a wolf's head and a body covered in fur — it was a common monster to encounter in the world of monster hunting, and generally regarded as being on the weaker side of average. But Furu could tell immediately that this was no mere werewolf.

Myth-class... if not that, then it's close...

Furu's legs went numb. She was unable to stay standing, and fell immediately on her butt.

"You didn't wet yourself, did you?" Leader asked, looking down at the cowering, trembling Furu.

"Of course not!"

"Really? Takachi would love to hear about an incontinent miko..."

"I don't want to know about Takachi's fetishes!" Furu snapped.

Leader's quip — perhaps intentionally — quelled Furu's panic, allowing her to look back at the werewolf.

Standing, it was a head taller than Leader, perhaps about two meters tall. It had beautiful, glossy black fur, but no obvious special features besides that.

This werewolf must have been what Leader was after... but

what did he intend to do? Furu watched quizzically as Leader began walking towards the werewolf.

"Hey, Leader! What are you doing? We have to get out of here!" Furu sat up and quickly called after him.

"Oh, we can't," Leader said calmly. "We can't beat him, or run away. If he wants to kill us, he'll do it in a split second. All we can do is talk to him in the hope that we won't upset him."

"Huh? Huh?!"

While Furu was in a panic, Leader walked right up to the werewolf. He was well within reach of its claws; it could rip him apart with the smallest motion of its hand. Unless they worked out like Takachi, monster hunters were generally vulnerable to direct attacks, and Leader was no exception.

"Good evening," Leader said, in a totally casual tone. "Where did you come from?"

"Australia," the werewolf responded, its voice thick and gravelly. Perhaps it was difficult for it to talk in beast form.

"You swam all this way?" Leader asked.

"I don't like planes."

Furu was on tenterhooks, but the werewolf was surprisingly forthcoming with his answers. There was no sense of malice from him. At the least, then, there seemed no chance that he would immediately snap and kill Leader.

"That's a long way. So, what did you come here for?" Leader asked.

"The princess."

A cryptic answer, but Furu knew what the werewolf was referring to: the vampire princess they had been talking about earlier. Up until now, she hadn't fully processed why the vampire princess's appearance was a threat, but it all suddenly snapped into place. If she was drawing monsters of this caliber to her, she was definitely dangerous.

"I see. The prophecy was true, eh? So which are you?" Leader's words were all too flippant.

Furu's own heart was pounding. There was a certain attitude one was supposed to take when facing a being of great power, but Leader was showing almost no respect.

"Which what?" the werewolf asked.

"Are you the princess's enemy, or her ally?" Leader asked.

At the word "enemy," the werewolf's body suddenly projected

malice.

"L-L-Leader! Apologize! Apologize now!" Furu called out in a panicked voice. His sheer carelessness was dizzying.

"You think I... am the princess's enemy?" the werewolf rumbled.

"Now, don't be angry," Leader said. "So you're her ally. I understand, all right?"

While Leader calmly smoothed it over, Furu was preparing for imminent death.

"I see."

But the werewolf easily backed down. Furu was relieved that he seemed a surprisingly reasonable beast, but she couldn't presume just yet.

"I've been searching the world... and I finally found her," the werewolf said with deep emotion in his voice. He must have been swimming all around the globe.

The words *What an idiot* drifted through her mind, but she quickly drove them out. If the thought showed on her face, it could mean her life.

"Might I ask a question about your princess?" Leader asked.

"Okay." The werewolf hadn't shown any sign of cunning this whole time. He just answered everything he was asked.

"The princess you're searching for... the vampire princess. She appears to have shown up in this town, Seishin. Many others appear to have realized this, and have come here just as you have."

"Oh?" the werewolf asked.

"We stand opposed to supernatural creatures," Leader explained. "I'm sure organizations like ours exist everywhere around the world, so you may already know this, but there's something of a mutual support group among them, you see. That group realized something was coming here today, and requested that we do something about it, which is why we're here. A small and weak band such as we could hardly refuse them. It's quite a pickle."

As usual, Leader's manner of speaking was extremely off-the-cuff. He didn't actually seem bothered in the least.

"And while there is coercion involved in our being here, nonetheless, we do try to protect this city from the shadows. So we can't simply let things remain the way they are. I was wondering if, in consideration of those people who have so much influence here,

you could stave off on causing too much trouble. What do you think? Would you mind coming along with me?"

"Very well." The werewolf agreed to it with surprising ease, showing no suspicion towards the man he'd just met and had no reason to trust. "I have no intention of causing trouble for those around the princess, either."

Is that just... Leader's personality and conversational skills? Probably not... As far as Furu could tell, the werewolf was just extremely forthright.

"Thank you," Leader said. "My, you are lucky. I happen to have a clue as to the location of the princess. You could find her before anyone else."

"By the way, is the one who's been standing there silently one of you?" The werewolf looked toward the seated Furu.

Furu quickly nodded her head, then immediately realized something strange. She hadn't been silent; she had raised her voice several times in a voice close to a scream. And the werewolf's gaze was looking past her.

With a deep sense of foreboding, she slowly turned around.

Behind her was a girl sitting on a box.

"Eek!" Even knowing there would be someone there when she turned around, Furu still couldn't restrain her scream.

That box hadn't been there before, she was sure. It was like a trunk suitcase, reminiscent of the days when such things had been made with wood and leather, and large enough to fit a small child inside. The girl sitting atop it smiled down at Furu and the others.

She was like an old book. That was Furu's initial impression. She wore a faded, old dress that looked as if it had been dug up from some ruined castle from the Middle Ages. Her long, red hair was also lacking in sheen, as if it had dulled over time. She seemed to Furu like an antique, something that had been in one form for many, many years.

"You're too startled by everything," the girl said. "Though it is funny."

Furu stiffened in shock. There shouldn't be a girl there. Furu's senses weren't picking up anyone in the place where the girl was.

"H-How long have you been there?" Furu demanded.

"Since the beginning," the girl said. "I was here before you were, in fact."

Her total lack of presence meant that Furu couldn't perform an

analysis on her, but it was painfully clear that she wasn't an ordinary human.

"Who are you?" Leader asked. For once, there was surprise in his tone. He didn't have any detection powers like Furu did, but he also wasn't so oblivious as to not notice someone right in front of his eyes.

"Monster Hunter (Sage) and Monster Hunter (Miko), eh? And that wolf there is Fenrir... you can't be the real one, can you?" Starkly refusing to answer the question, the girl pointed to each of them in turn, murmuring to herself as if confirming something.

"People just started calling me that. After the god-slayer, I think," the werewolf responded, straightforwardly. He really was forthright.

"Are you in our line of work, then?" Leader asked, caution in his tone.

They had been talking about monster hunting earlier, and it was clear from Furu's dress that she was a miko. But there was no way the girl could have known what Leader really did.

If she was in the same business, she could have known about him by reputation. But Furu didn't recognize her, and Leader didn't seem to, either.

Furu glared at the girl. Analysis was her job. If she couldn't do that, then what was she there for? Just thinking about it got under her skin...

"The wolf over there is just special. You don't have to kick yourself over your failure to notice me." The girl jumped down from the trunk, making an elegant landing.

Furu drew back, still crouching. Leader had pulled his sheng biao back out. The werewolf remained composed.

"No need to be so twitchy," the girl said. "I'm not your enemy. I was thinking I might help you... first, allow me to introduce myself."

She gave the large trunk a light thump. Immediately, it split down the middle and opened. Furthermore, bookshelves slid out from the inside, expanding in both directions. The shelves were packed with books.

"My name is Ende. As you can see, I'm a bookseller."

Suddenly, presence flowed out from the girl. Now, Furu could sense a living girl with body heat where she stood. An instant later, her idling analysis completed.

“Why do I have to be surrounded by difficult people?!” Furu yelled to no one in particular as Ende’s true nature came to her.

“What is she?” Leader asked, walking up behind Furu with the werewolf at his side.

“A Worldview Holder... in charge of destiny.”

“A particularly bad one?” he asked.

“A particularly bad one,” Furu answered.

This was worse than the werewolf. Werewolves had brute strength, but nothing more. Ende could influence the world on a grander scale.

“So you’re of those who call us Holders? Everyone has different names for it, which gets very tiresome... I prefer the name Readers for people like me,” Ende interjected, apparently overhearing their conversation.

“So, what do you want?” Leader demanded. “I thought people like you just watched us lower life forms go about our business from up in your tall towers. Even when you try to entice people to play around with their destiny, I’ve never heard of you helping them.”

“Th-That’s right! It’s very suspicious!” Furu found it very possible those words themselves were lies intended to mess with them, so she remained on her guard.

After a moment’s thought, Ende pointed to her right eye. “My eyes can see words. They see labels above a person’s head that describe their role.”

Furu cocked her head at the outrageous claim. She wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be impressive, and she couldn’t figure out why the girl was bringing it up now.

“Well, as you’re thinking right now, it’s not that big a deal, which is why I never gave the ability a name,” Ende said. “When I need to explain it to people, all I say is, ‘I see words.’ But lately, I have started to think about naming it.”

“Oh?” Furu hesitated, still unsure of what to say or what she was getting at.

“Soul Reader,” the girl whispered softly.

“Is that what you call your ability to see things?” It didn’t sound terribly descriptive to Furu, but if that was what the ability’s user had decided, she didn’t see a problem with it.

But Ende looked unsatisfied. “No! Yes, but no! I... I don’t want it to have that name! But no matter how hard I think about it, it’s

all that comes to mind!" Ende's previously detached manner had taken a sudden 180, and she began shouting in annoyance.

"What are you talking about?" Leader asked, stunned.

The werewolf was still standing calmly beside him, but didn't seem particularly interested in the conversation.

"I'm saying... that someone is rewriting the 'books' that I read! Someone has decided that this power should be called 'Soul Reader'! It's unforgivable! My books! My very own books!" Ende raged, violently gesticulating with her entire body. Furu worried that she might end up tearing that worn-out old dress of hers to shreds.

"Aren't you the one who writes the 'books'? Can't you just rewrite them?" Furu asked.

"No! All I can do is choose which one to read!"

"Ah... then couldn't you, metaphorically, just read a book that doesn't have 'Soul Reader' in it?"

"It is, metaphorically, in all of them!" Ende shouted.

Furu was growing a little confused. The conversation's metaphor was becoming impenetrable. "So, what are you going to do? It seems to me that you should just deal with the ability having that name."

"It gets on my nerves! This is the first time anyone's done anything so stifling to me since the day I was born! Oh, that's right, I used to think names didn't matter! But now that it's there, the fact that I can't rename it is really getting under my skin!"

"And... is that related to the way you want to help us?" Furu asked.

"Yes," the girl said. "I have an idea of who caused this, and if that person dies, things go back to normal. I'll need the wolf's power to do it, and if I take the wolf away, that's one less thing you'll need to do. And it'll take the wolf to the princess. Not a bad deal, I think."

"I'm not unwilling... but this is quite surprising," said Leader. "I'd always assumed that when you people wanted something done, you used more heavy-handed measures to force people into it."

Furu felt the same way. She'd thought the girl would have the power of destiny and to intervene in world affairs.

"We're not omnipotent," Ende explained to the skeptical Leader. "You can tell that from the fact that the world stays in balance, can't you? And when someone has the same power we do,

it's impossible for us to intervene directly. There's an order of things we need to respect."

"Rather than standing here talking this whole time, why don't we go somewhere else?" Leader asked.

Ende, who had lost a bit of her cool, agreed.

Furu let out a sigh. She was relieved that nothing was going to happen here just yet, but at the same time, things did seem to have gotten more complicated.

Chapter 1: The Secrets of the World are Revealed With Surprising Ease?!

The label “Little Sister” hung in the air.

Yuichi sat, cross-legged and glassy-eyed, as he watched Yoriko hard at work on her travel preparations.

Yoriko Sakaki. As it said on the label above her head, she was Yuichi’s little sister, and in her second year of middle school. She was a beautiful girl with striking, long, black hair, currently dressed casually in denim hot pants and a camisole. She was pulling items out of her closet and scrutinizing them carefully — so carefully that there was still almost nothing in her large travel bag.

“Do you need all that clothing?” Yuichi asked.

It wasn’t even noon yet, but Yuichi had already finished his prep for the summer training camp they’d be going on tomorrow. Of course, he didn’t have much to bring — just two days’ worth of underpants and T-shirts in his backpack.

The training camp was set to last a week, but they were going to Aiko’s family’s villa, and Aiko had said that they could do laundry there. Yuichi thought it would be best to just wash his clothes as he needed to.

“Of course I do! You’re the one being ridiculous.”

Yuichi was slightly cowed by the venomous look Yoriko threw him. She apparently intended to wear a different outfit every day.

“By the way, I guess I should have asked this earlier, but are you serious about this?” he asked. “This is a training camp for our survival club.”

“Mutsuko said that I could come,” Yoriko shot back.

Though it was a club training camp, it was an unofficial one; their adviser wasn’t coming, so there was technically no issue with Yoriko joining them. Even so, Yuichi still had a bad feeling about it.

“Big Brother, if you have time to spare, why don’t you help Mutsuko?” Yoriko said without looking back. Her eyes were focused on the row of outfits in front of her. “Last time I looked, it was

absolute chaos in there."

"Is there anything I can even help her with?" Yuichi murmured to himself. Still, he stood up and headed for the room next door.

The door was open, so he walked right in. The room was as cluttered as usual, and at the center of it was Mutsuko, struggling to cram things into a bag.

This was Mutsuko Sakaki. She was Yuichi's older sister, and in her second year in high school. She was a beautiful girl, too, but unlike his little sister, anything you said about her had to be prefaced with "unfortunate."

The ornaments in her hair were one such expression of this. Though quite flashy, they were becoming on her, so that wasn't the problem. The problem was that they were real bladed weapons — made of Damascus steel, as she herself claimed.

In addition, she was currently dressed in a white ao dai, a type of Vietnamese folk costume. That looked good on her, too — it was just seeing her wear it as day-to-day wear in Japan that left Yuichi at a loss for how to react.

Above her head, the label "Big Sister" hovered, seeming to assert her place as Yuichi's elder.

But it does say "Big Sister," not "Elder Sister"... he thought, mulling over the nuance in maturity that it implied.

Yuichi had first begun seeing labels over people's heads that spring. He knew that they revealed something about the person they described, but he hadn't figured out any more than that.

He had grown accustomed to this phenomenon, and was now able to ignore them, as long as they didn't contain anything too outrageous.

"Huh? What is it, Yu?" Mutsuko looked up, her hand still in her travel bag. That same instant, something sprung out from just below her hand.

Yuichi reflexively grabbed the thing between his index and middle finger.

A disc-shaped blade, about ten centimeters in diameter, moving at 1/8 the speed of sound. If I dodge it, it'll put a mark in the wall that'll make our mother sad. Such was the judgment he had made in a moment.

Yuichi looked at the object he had caught. It was a weapon of Indian origin known as a chakram, a bladed disc.

"Sis. What do you have to say for yourself?" Yuichi waved the chakram around lightly, glaring at Mutsuko.

Mutsuko certainly did look uncomfortable, but suddenly opened her mouth. "If you were a character in *Another* you'd be dead right now!"

"But it's me, so I'm alive!" Yuichi snapped.

"I-It's training! You never know when something might pop out at you!"

"You're *so* lying! I know a 'Whoops' expression when I see one!" he shouted.

Why does she even need that at a training camp? he wondered.

The thing Mutsuko was trying to shove into the bag was a metallic glove known as a gauntlet. Multiple chakrams were loaded on the outside of it.

"Oh, by the way! This is called a chakram shooter—"

"Spare me the explanation. Is there anything I can help with?" It seemed like the explanation would be a long one, so he cut her off at the pass.

"Hmm, I can't think of anything..." Mutsuko seemed to be seriously thinking about it, but came up with nothing. She was probably thinking that having Yuichi bumble around trying to help would be less efficient than just doing it herself.

"That's okay," Yuichi said. "Also, uh, maybe you could you lay off a little? You probably shouldn't try to cram all those deadly weapons in one bag."

"Ahh!" Mutsuko's eyes opened wide.

"What?"

"I was so focused on trying to cram all the stuff in, I didn't even think about it! I should just get another bag, right?"

Yuichi was thinking over how to respond to her this time when the phone in his pocket rang.

It was his classmate, Tomomi Hamasaki.

Nihao the China was a Chinese restaurant.

It was a small institution near the back gate to Seishin High, the school Yuichi attended. It was also the home of his classmate,

Tomomi Hamasaki.

Lacking for anything else to do, he had come in response to Tomomi's call.

The restaurant itself gave off a faint impression of griminess, as usual, and there was no one there, even during what should have been the lunch rush.

"Hey, thanks for coming!" Tomomi cried out as he entered the store.

She was wearing a cheongsam with her hair done up in two buns. When they had class together at school, she left her hair down and wore glasses, which made her look like a completely different person. The label above her head read "Fake." He didn't know what that meant, and he wasn't eager to investigate.

"No customers as usual, I see..." Yuichi said, then cast a glance at the restaurant's owner, a man with braided hair who was reading a newspaper leisurely behind the counter. Tomomi aside, he thought he might take offense at that, but the man didn't bat an eye.

The label above this man's head was "Nihao the China," the same name as the restaurant. It was the most incomprehensible of the labels Yuichi had seen so far.

"Serial Killer"... "Vampire"... "Witch"... "Zombie"... "Anthromorph"...

He didn't really know what any of them meant, but they at least evoked certain images. "Nihao the China" was completely opaque.

Yuichi had a seat at the restaurant's sole round table.

"Your order?" Tomomi asked him with a bright smile.

"I'm not here as a customer, remember? You said you had something to talk about."

"What?!" Tomomi scowled, flying suddenly off the handle. Yuichi was taken aback. "You think you can come to a Chinese restaurant to just sit down and talk? What the hell?! You wouldn't meet up at a coffee shop and only order water, but you'll do that for something even worse?!"

"Don't get mad at me! You're the one who invited me out! Is this some kind of strategy because you don't get any customers?"

"Yes, in part! Do you know how hard-pressed we are to find customers? Do you just want to abandon your struggling, poverty-stricken classmate? Well, Sakaki?!" She may have been trying to illicit sympathy, but her tone was overbearing and superior.

"...Fine. Fried rice lunch, please." Yuichi picked the cheapest lunch set from the lunchtime menu on the table. He'd intended to eat lunch at home, but if she was going to interrogate him like this, he didn't have a choice.

"Dad! One fried rice lunch!" Tomomi called out the order in a loud voice, despite it being unnecessary in the small restaurant.

Tomomi's father, head chef Nihao the China, folded up his newspaper, set it on the counter, and went into the kitchen.

"Boy, you won't listen to my own story, but the minute I drop Aiko's name, you come running? Kind of hurts, y'know?" Tomomi started, sitting down opposite of him. It seemed she had no intention of doing her job.

"Listen... if you say someone's life is on the line, of course I'm going to come," Yuichi said. On the phone before, Tomomi had said that Aiko was in danger.

"Oh? So if I said my own life was in danger, you'd listen to my story?" she asked.

"...I'd find it a little bit fishy, but I wouldn't want you dying because I ignored you, so I'd at least hear you out," Yuichi answered after a moment's thought. He was a bit closer to her than most of his classmates, so he probably wouldn't be able to sleep well at night if something happened to her.

"You're very honest, Sakaki," she said.

"So? What's going on?" he asked.

Judging from how she had talked when she'd come to see him in the hospital, Tomomi knew a lot about what was going on in town, so Yuichi doubted she was lying or joking.

"It's going to be a long story. Is that okay?" she asked.

"Well, I did order food, and I don't have much else to do right now..."

"The truth is, I don't understand everything about it, either. And it might sound a little fishy in parts, so reserve judgment until you hear the whole thing," she said.

Yuichi nodded and settled in to listen.

"Now... Actually, before I start, how about you spill all your secrets?"

"What secrets?" Yuichi asked, playing dumb. He'd had a lot of secrets from the start, but lately they just seemed to keep piling on.

"Look, don't bother feigning ignorance after what you did to our shop, okay? I know pretty much everything anyway. That

Aiko's a vampire, that you beat up her big brother, all that stuff." Tomomi looked completely exasperated.

"Oh... that's right, Sis was pretty thoughtless back there, huh?" Yuichi remembered how she had leaked the whole series of events to the people in the store by providing a live feed of everything that went down.

"Well, she wasn't totally thoughtless," she said. "Why do you think we don't get many customers here?"

"Because the owner's a weirdo?"

"No! I mean, he is, but that's not the reason — it's because normal people can't come in here. They don't even realize it exists!" she cried.

"Huh? But I can come in."

"That's because you're not normal!"

Yuichi found he couldn't argue with her. After everything that had happened, he couldn't exactly claim to be just an average high school student.

"I'm not saying you're a yokai or a monster, okay?" she said. "I mean 'not normal' in the sense that you've gotten mixed up in special circumstances. Now, to keep going, this is a pocket dimension."

A pocket dimension. Disbelieving, Yuichi looked out the window.

The light of the setting sun shone in.

"Huh?" He had come in around noon, and not much time could have passed since then. He quickly checked the watch on his arm. It was just after noon. His instincts were correct.

Yuichi rose to his feet, sending the chair over with a clatter. He approached the window.

Across the road was the hedge that surrounded Seishin High. The restaurant was behind the school, so there was nothing suspicious about the view. Which meant that it was only the time that was different.

"...I guess it could be worse..." Yuichi bounced back after a moment. Telling himself not to fixate too much on it, he picked his chair up off the floor.

"Wow, you adapt quickly," she commented. "I like that about you... Well, when I say pocket dimension, I just mean it's a little out of phase with everything else. That's why normal people can't come in here."

“But the anthromorphs made it in,” Yuichi objected. But a second later, he realized it was because they weren’t normal, either.

“...Which means Orihara... has entered an isekai without realizing it...” Yuichi wondered if she would be happy to know this place was one.

“Oh, and time doesn’t pass quicker here or anything, so don’t worry about that,” Tomomi added.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Yuichi said. “So now that I know why you don’t get any customers, I have to ask... why do you even run the restaurant?”

“I’ll explain that later. For now, I want a full account of what it is you’ve gotten involved in.”

“Because it’s connected to the stuff with Noro, right? Okay.” There was no point in hiding it now. Yuichi began relaying everything that had gone down since the beginning of spring.

How, after the end of spring vacation, he had suddenly become able to see labels over people’s heads.

How he had realized that one of his classmates, Natsuki Takeuchi, was a serial killer, how she had threatened him as a result, and how they had achieved a tenuous reconciliation afterward.

How he’d had to stop the ambitions of the vampire Aiko Noro’s big brother, Kyoya.

“Oh, wow... I know I asked, but that was way worse than I thought,” Tomomi said. “I wish I hadn’t.”

“You little...”

“But anyway... Soul Reader, huh? That’s not good.”

“Really? I’ve gotten pretty used to it lately, so I was thinking maybe it wasn’t a problem after all?”

“Hmm, I’ll have to explain the Aiko situation for that to make sense, too, so let’s go to that first. Aiko transformed during that incident the other day, right?”

Yuichi thought back to Aiko’s appearance then. Sparkling wings had appeared from her back. It had been an unbelievable sight.

“That was really not good, okay?” Tomomi said. “Aiko’s awakening energized the denizens of the dark world.”

“What was all that, exactly? I don’t have a clue, and not even she seemed to know.”

“Apparently it’s called the Vampire Queen,” Tomomi said. “I don’t know much about it myself, but according to a yokai

acquaintance of mine, she was putting out a ton of spiritual power!"

"Yokai acquaintance?" Yuichi asked. That didn't seem like a line you could just throw out there offhandedly.

"So there are a whole lot of forces making big moves, all around Aiko! They divide into roughly two groups. One group is creatures like Aiko: vampires and yokai and stuff. They either want to support Aiko as leader, or kill her and take her place."

"Isn't that two groups?" Yuichi asked.

"They're similar in the end. They act according to yokai rules, so it's not that big a problem."

Yuichi nodded. It was true; there didn't seem to be anything unusual happening in Aiko's vicinity for now. She had been calling him daily of late, worried about Yuichi's health, but she herself sounded as cheerful as ever. Aiko wasn't good at hiding things, so if anything was wrong, he'd probably know right away.

"The problem is the other group... and this one is a little hard to explain," Tomomi said. "My knowledge is pretty scattered, so I don't know for sure, but... well, as you already know, there are vampires and anthromorphs and stuff out there in the world. That's weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is weird... but it means they must have been around for centuries, right?" Yuichi hadn't thought too hard about what it meant to have superhuman beings in the world prior to this.

"Even so, it's strange, isn't it? Like, remember how the vampire you fought transformed? It increased its mass freely, and its clothing changed with it, right? Doesn't that seem kind of... like, physically impossible? And from another angle, doesn't it seem strange that something like that could have existed for so long without people knowing about it?"

"You have a point... there's no real logical explanation for it," Yuichi agreed.

"Yet logical or not, they clearly exist, so we just have to accept it," Tomomi said. "Well, the real answer is that they operate under different physical laws. They exist as part of a different worldview than we do, with different rules."

Tomomi continued to explain that there were as many worlds out there as there were people. "People" referred to beings with human-like intelligence, who each had their own worlds.

These worlds were all different, but since they had many broad

points in common, they could compromise to co-exist.

"Yep, I don't understand a bit of it!" Yuichi admitted honestly.

"This is all just what I was told, so I don't know all the details, but the point is, every person has their own world," Tomomi said. "And while every person has their own world, the broad outlines are predetermined, and there are central figures who are like the personification of a given worldview. Those people are called Worldview Holders."

"And they decide the rules of the world?" Yuichi asked. It all sounded pretty absurd to Yuichi. People like that would basically be called gods.

"They aren't necessarily doing it consciously," Tomomi said. "But the worldviews of the people around the Holder are strongly influenced by the Holder's own. As a result, the world around a Holder will cohere into one the Holder recognizes. Of course, there are a lot of Holders out there, which means you sometimes wind up with conflicting worldviews coming into contact. When that happens, it's called a World Conflict, and the weaker world is integrated into the stronger one."

"You expect me to believe that? How would you even know?" Yuichi demanded.

"Normal people don't notice it," she said. "But sometimes you have someone awaken some supernatural ability, or catch a glimpse of a yokai or something, and then they realize that there's more than just one set of rules in the world. We chalk this up to 'worldview,' but there are other opinions on how to interpret it. Some people think something else is going on, like the world is all the dream in the mind of a clam, or that it's all a computer simulation, or something."

Her words set Yuichi deep into thought. It was too much for him to accept right away. But those words that Yuichi could see... Maybe he was seeing something that had to do with this "worldview" she was describing.

"You don't have to believe in it, Sakaki," Tomomi said. "What matters is that some people do. And now that Aiko's awakened, there are people who believe her to be the central figure of a worldview where vampires can transform and fly."

"And you're saying those people will come after her?" Yuichi asked.

"Yeah. Aiko doesn't realize it yet, and she's not very strong. But

the more she awakens, the more she may begin to draw in the worlds around her, and overwrite them as worlds where yokai run rampant. There are forces out there who are afraid of that, and who will stop at nothing to end it while they still can... that's what I mean when I say that I think Aiko is in danger."

"Not really much to go on, is it? I'll try to be careful, though." He didn't know, concretely, what he was supposed to do, or how to go about it. But either way, he should probably keep an eye out around Aiko.

"Take special care during your training camp trip," Tomomi said. "I won't tell you not to go, but a Holder who leaves their home base will suffer a weakening of their worldview. Holders with sturdy worldviews rarely die, but sometimes you see a Holder take a trip away from home, and they die just like that."

As she finished her advice, Tomomi stood up, went to the kitchen and brought back Yuichi's fried rice lunch. Then she sat down in front of him again.

"What kind of waitress watches her customer eat?" Yuichi asked.

"I'm not done talking! Don't you want to know how I know all this, who Nihao the China is, why your Soul Reader is such a dangerous ability..."

"Oh, no thanks," Yuichi said lightly. "I don't want to hear it."

*****

Mochizuki Gastrointestinal Hospital, now known as the Pink Clinic. It looked abandoned, but it wasn't. Electricity, gas, water, and essential utilities were all in place, and the entrances and exits could be locked.

Night after night, rowdy young people went there to have a good time. They didn't have to force their way in, either.

The owner of the building was Michio Jonouchi: president of Jonouchi Pharmaceuticals, and the father of Takashi Jonouchi. He had once used this building as a base of operations to raise his own personal militia. But that militia had been stolen from him by a vampire, and then destroyed by something else. As a result, no one came to that former hospital anymore.

Michio Jonouchi believed the place to have no further use to him, and seemed to be intent on abandoning it. But for Takashi

Jonouchi, it still served a purpose.

"Honestly... how can you live in a place like this?" Yuri Konishi sneered as she entered the room.

It was true that it was in a poor state — disposable lunch trays and instant food containers scattered all around — but Takashi couldn't see how it was any of her business how or where he lived.

"Why do you care?" he asked. "What matters is that we can talk in private here."

It was an underground room in the hospital that only members of the Jonouchi family could access. Takashi had been living there for a while, ever since he'd lost his wolf-man powers.

It contained all the necessary appliances (even if they were cheap ones), and he wanted for nothing there. The Jonouchi family had hidden rooms like this all over the city. Takashi didn't know what his father had had in mind in building them, but he knew it couldn't be anything good.

"The more important question is, what do we do next? It sounded like you had a plan, after all," he said.

Yuri had claimed that she would give Takashi the power of the anthromorph. That was why he had taken her hand. He had brought her here to hear her proposal.

While Yuri glared at him, Takashi took a seat on the room's simple bed.

From there, he gazed at her. And once again, it occurred to him that she wasn't his type.

Yuri was a beautiful girl who did not look Japanese, with her curves, her blonde hair, and her deep-set features. But he couldn't stand her eyes. Her gaze was the picture of haughty arrogance, lacking any trace of ladylike refinement.

"Kurokami Island," she said. "That's where you should go."

Takashi, having no idea what she was talking about, prompted her to continue.

"We have two objectives," Yuri went on. "One is to restore your anthromorph power. That island is home to the Beast God faith, and nearly everyone who lives there is some sort of anthromorph. They'll be holding a large ritual there on the day of the full moon, so we'll need to go there quickly in order to make it in time."

"Wait a minute!" Takashi interrupted Yuri before she could continue. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"What is it?"

“I feel like I’m missing something here. How is undergoing the ritual on this island going to make me a werewolf again?”

“Oh, that’s right,” she said. “I had a feeling I was omitting something fundamental.”

“You barely talked to me at all on the way here.”

“Put simply, the world we live in is part of a story,” she said.

Takashi fell silent and narrowed his eyes at Yuri. Perhaps he had taken hands with the wrong person.

“Excuse me! Why are you looking at me like that?” Yuri demanded.

“Are you putting me on?” Takashi asked.

“Let me see, how to explain it...” Yuri pondered. “To say that it’s a story is more a figure of speech... Have you ever heard of the anthropic principle?”

“That’s the philosophy that the universe is capable of supporting human life because it wouldn’t be observable otherwise, right?” A girl Takashi had dated a long time ago had seen it in some anime she’d watched and described it to him. He had found it a very foolish theory.

“I’m glad you’re familiar with it. That will speed things up. So let’s begin based on that. The ‘anthro’ in ‘anthropic’ principle refers to mankind, right? Lumping all humans together. That’s a bit of a reckless way of looking at it, don’t you think? So let’s assume that universes are not designed to suit all of humanity, but to suit individuals. In other words, everyone has their own universe.”

“But... the universe doesn’t suit me at all! If the world I perceive was made for me, then it would bow to my every whim, wouldn’t it? But it doesn’t! You’ve seen what I’ve been reduced to, losing my power and wandering hopelessly through this city...”

“That’s easily explained,” she countered. “It simply means that you lost, at some point, without even realizing it. You were drawn into someone else’s world — in other words, someone else’s story. Demoted from a protagonist to a mere side character — an enemy to be vanquished. But that isn’t your fault. It is inevitable that those who fail to recognize the existence of the story unwittingly become characters in somebody else’s.”

“Who’s the protagonist, then?” he demanded. “Exactly who did this to—”

“Aiko Noro.”

Takashi stiffened. He had some unpleasant associations with the

name.

“That’s right,” she said. “I’ve seen it. Aiko Noro is trying to barge her way into the center of a story about the existence of vampires and anthromorphs.”

“I’ll believe your talk about stories for now... but how does that lead to me getting my power back?” he asked.

“You need to let yourself be drawn into the story of the Beast God faith on Kurokami Island. The god of that island is the embodiment of another story — another protagonist, in other words. At the moment, it’s far more powerful than Aiko Noro. Since you’ve transformed once already, I think it’s quite possible that you could succeed.”

“...I understand,” Takashi said. Yuri seemed to have unwavering faith in what she was saying. Rather than trying to argue further, he decided to accept it and move on. “You said your first objective was to get me to transform again. What was your other objective?”

“To kill Aiko Noro,” Yuri said.

“Does this have something to do with her being a protagonist?” he asked.

“Yes,” Yuri said. “With the Noro family currently weakened, this is our chance to strike. With Aiko Noro gone, this vampire-centric world will burst at the seams... and in that moment, I can create a dark world of anthromorphs centered around me!”

Takashi frankly found Yuri’s explanation dubious and hard to swallow. But he had nowhere to go, and not even the faintest clue as to what he should do from here on out. Thus, if it offered him even the slightest possibility of restoring the power he sought, he had no choice but to go along with this slightly nutty girl.

He steeled himself for what lay ahead.

Chapter 2: What's So Fun About Going to the Beach?

Their destination was on the far western coast of Japan's main island, Honshu.

Between the bullet train and transfers between local buses, it had taken Yuichi's group half a day to get there from Seishin.

It was, as the travel time might imply, a remote country town.

The Noros had summer houses in far more accessible locations, and indeed, Aiko's father had acted unhappy about their choice. But the final decision had lain with Mutsuko, and once she had made up her mind, no one could change it.

It wasn't large enough to be called a peninsula. It was just a plot of land that jutted out from the archipelago of Japan like a blister. It was known as Madono Island, for though it was connected by land, it was surrounded by the ocean.

The only way to get there was an isthmus several hundred meters across. Of course, it could also be accessed by boat, but there were no regular ferries there.

Fishing and farming were the main forms of livelihood for the residents there. Of the two, fishing was slightly more common. The part of the island that faced the Sea of Japan was known as a natural fishing harbor, and the town's major export was fish cake made from the copious seafood that was caught there.

It also did healthy business as a tourist retreat, thanks to its breathtaking views. Though not well known to the general public, it was famous among the upper classes for its summer houses.

The population had been decreasing recently, and currently stood at 1,018. That wasn't really a problem for the locals, but...

"A terrible doom will soon visit them!!!" Mutsuko cried.

"No it won't!" Yuichi yelled back at Mutsuko. Then he looked around quickly. Everyone on the bus, aside from their group, was elderly couples. They were all likely residents of the town, and he

had wondered if they might have been offended by Mutsuko's comment. Fortunately, it seemed the comment had gone unheard. They were all snoozing away.

"Aww! It seems like a pretty dangerous place to be if something were to happen, though!" Mutsuko announced.

It was just past noon, and the bus was now crossing the land bridge to Madono Island. To the left was a sheer precipice to the ocean, and to the right, a towering, rocky cliff. In other words, if this road were to be blocked off, there would be no way of getting back to the mainland.

"If that cliff ever caved in, it'd become an isolated island!" Mutsuko added. "Then... what if! What if someone was killed there? The police couldn't get there right away! We'd have to solve the murder ourselves! It'd be a closed circle mystery! Without the police, there'd be no forensic analysis, and the murderer would surely be among us!"

"If that happened, we could just leave it to the great detective we met along the way," Yuichi said.

"You really think we'd just *run into* a great detective?" Aiko asked. She was squeezed up against him, which was making Yuichi feel a little awkward. He couldn't stop thinking of how smooth her arm felt against his.

Aiko Noro. A petite girl with a short bob haircut. She was Yuichi's classmate and fellow member of the survival club. Above her head hung the label "Love Interest." It had previously been "Vampire," but she didn't do much that was vampiric, so he didn't even think about it most of the time.

They were sitting in the five-passenger seat that made up the back of the bus. From the left, it was Natsuki, Kanako, Yoriko, Yuichi, Aiko, and Mutsuko. Six of them. They had managed to fit, but it was very cramped.

There were quite a few open seats elsewhere, and it might have been easier to spread out more, but Mutsuko wouldn't hear of it.

They were also all in their school uniforms. It was a formality that probably didn't matter much, but since it was a club activity, they'd decided to go with it.

"If there just happens to be a rockslide, and there just happens to be a murder, what's wrong with assuming there just happens to be a great detective?" Yuichi asked.

"I just think it's kind of unfair of you to want to push it all on

him just because you can't be bothered..." Aiko said.

"How are we supposed to solve a murder, exactly?" Yuichi retorted. "It's a bit over the heads of ordinary high school students, don't you think?"

"If you were the detective... you could probably give the suspects hell," Aiko offered.

Yuichi grimaced openly at the words. She was right. If a murder occurred, there'd be a limited number of suspects. The quickest way to solve it might be through torture. He had confidence in his ability to make people talk.

"Aw, no! That isn't fair! You've gotta solve the case with logic and deduction!" Mutsuko protested. Mutsuko loved stories about torture and violence, but clearly, she drew a line between that and her love of mysteries.

"A whodunnit where everything is solved with violence... that sounds like a good light novel," a quiet girl with a soft hair style spoke up in a tranquil voice. It was Kanako Orihara, survival club vice president and "Isekai Fanatic," a lover of stories about ordinary people transported to other worlds and time periods.

She wrote stories herself, and published them on an online fiction website, where they were apparently becoming fairly popular. The way she spoke suggested she was getting inspiration as a writer.

"Big Brother, there's a detective out there who once handled over 600 murder cases in a year," Yoriko suggested.

"I thought that was a manga."

"If we meet a boy detective where we're going, you'll protect me, won't you?" Yoriko, who had been clinging to Yuichi's arm this whole time, seemed to perceive a boy detective as a harbinger of death.

Natsuki said nothing.

The entire time they had been on the bus, Natsuki Takeuchi had been silently staring out the window. Others called her one of the most beautiful girls in the first-year class, and Yuichi found it plausible. Above her head hung the label "Love Interest II." It had previously been "Serial Killer."

An isolated island, huh? he thought.

What if Mutsuko was right about something happening there? His anxiety grew as he thought back to something Tomomi Hamasaki had told him.

*****

“Where are you going for your training camp?” Tomomi had asked him as he’d been finishing his Nihao the China fried rice lunch.

Yuichi explained about Madono Island. He wasn’t quite sure where it was, geographically, so Tomomi brought out an old map to check.

“Ah, it’s that kind of place...” Tomomi said gravely.

“Is it a problem?” Yuichi checked the map, as well. It was a town on the western edge of Honshu, jutting out into the Sea of Japan. It wasn’t physically very large — small enough you could cover it with a finger — so it was hard to read the specifics on the map.

“Well, see...” she hedged. “Closed-off places like this often end up forging a very specific worldview. A worldview is influenced by the number of people who believe in it, so they get stronger when you have a lot of people who believe the same thing clustered together in a small place. If another Holder went to a place like this, their own worldview could weaken as a result. In other words, Aiko might have trouble using her vampire powers in a place like this.”

“What do you mean?” Yuichi asked.

“I mean... a secluded country village that holds some gruesome ritual festival might have its own bizarre worldview, and might reject the concept of Western-style vampires. The god, or whatever, that their worldview venerates would have much more powerful influence. I mean, I guess I might be worrying too much. It could just be an ordinary harbor town.”

“Hmm...” Yuichi said. “But Noro’s family has a villa there, you know? It should be okay, given that.”

“So if anything happens, you can probably just retreat into the villa,” Tomomi agreed. “Aiko’s powers should activate there.”

“You keep talking like I’ll be relying on Noro, but I don’t intend to do that,” he said.

“Right. So no matter what happens, keep Aiko safe, okay? I think you can do it. My dad thinks so, too. He says you have potential.”

“Potential? Nihao the China said that?” Yuichi was a little happy to hear that. He had only seen him in action briefly, but Nihao the China had appeared to be a master of a serious martial

art. It seemed like an acknowledgment worth feeling pleased by.

"Hey, you want to be his heir?" Tomomi asked, leaning over the table. "You can succeed the Nihao the China name! I'd be okay with you, Sakaki. You're attractive, you're decisive, you're nice..."

"Not a chance."

"...you're forthright with your opinions... wait, hey! Are you saying I'm not good enough for you? Shouldn't you think about it a little more? With a beautiful girl like me hitting on you?"

"You were hitting on me?" Yuichi asked. "Well, I won't debate the beautiful girl part... because I'm nice, right?"

*****

"Sakaki?" Aiko asked.

"Huh?" Yuichi said, startled. Aiko was looking at him in concern. The fact that he'd been thinking about Tomomi made him feel a little bit awkward.

"We're here," she said.

The bus pulled to a stop, and everyone got off together.

It was the kind of place that made a citizen of the 21st century nervous. An unpaved road through the forest stretched out straight ahead. The bus stop was the only man-made structure around.

Aiko checked the map on her smartphone. "Apparently we have to walk a little ways from here. Though I don't know all the details myself..."

It seemed they still got a cell phone signal, at least. That reduced the chance of ending up in a closed circle mystery. Yuichi felt relieved.

They took a side path, and, after a little walking, arrived at a Western-style mansion.

Of course, it was only a summer house, so it wasn't as big as the Noros' main residence. But it was still large enough that the label "mansion" applied. It had apparently been imported from overseas, and thus, it seemed heavy with the weight of history.

As they approached the front door, it opened on its own. Yuichi felt a sense of deja vu; the doors at Aiko's house had opened by themselves, too.

"Welcome back, my lady." The person who appeared at the door produced another sense of deja vu.

"Huh? Akiko?" Aiko watched in vague disbelief.

The woman in the classical maid outfit bowed deeply.

Above the woman's head was the label "Vampire III." When he had met her at Aiko's house for the first time, Aiko had stressed to Yuichi that despite her youthful appearance, she was really quite old.

Incidentally, he didn't know what the number over her head meant. When he met people with the same classification, numbers seemed to correspond to the order in which Yuichi met them. But even then, not everyone had numbers.

"You guys are freaking late! What took you so long?" A blond-haired boy appeared from behind Akiko and started addressing Yuichi flippantly. "And hey, Yuichi, why'd you go on a summer training trip without telling me? I should get invitations to this stuff, y'know?"

His name was Kyoshiro Ibaraki, and today he was dressed casually in a T-shirt and messenger shorts. The label above his head was "Ibaraki-doji," and as the label implied, he was an honest-to-goodness oni. They had fought once before. Ever since, he seemed to be constantly poking his nose into Yuichi's business.

"Ha ha ha! Well met, traitors, and welcome to the Noro family villa! Tonight, we host the blood-soaked banquet of frenzied madness!" Another figure appeared from behind Ibaraki. It was Kyoya Noro. He was a third-year at Seishin High School and Aiko Noro's older brother. He was a vampire like Aiko and Akiko, and the label over his head read "Vampire II."

He had long hair and deep-set features. Normally he would be considered a very attractive man, but his outfit put that into doubt. It was a white straightjacket, strewn here and there with black leather belts that would seem to serve as binders for it. On top of that, he wore a black cape with red lining. Perhaps he was going for a "sealed vampire" theme.

A trio of unexpected housemates.

Yuichi hesitated for a minute, then punched Ibaraki.

Ibaraki went flying from the force of the blow, but immediately sprang up and marched back into his personal space. "Lay off the violence, would you?!"

Yuichi knew he had been holding back, but he was still surprised by how quickly Ibaraki recovered. He must have been expecting it.

"I didn't invite you," Yuichi retorted. "Thus, you're an uninvited

guest. Thus, an enemy."

"That's a pretty big leap in logic!" Ibaraki yelled.

"Weren't you the one who said you weren't going to hang around?" Yuichi shot back. "Quit acting buddy-buddy every time we meet. You're not going to win me over!"

Ibaraki was an oni who ate people. Yuichi couldn't really be friends with him. Natsuki had killed people too, of course. But cannibalism was where Yuichi really drew the line.

"I haven't done anything to humans lately, you know. I've been eating normal food, like humans eat. I'm experimenting, get it?" Ibaraki said theatrically. "If an oni can live without killing humans, it solves our problem, right?"

"I read a line like that in a manga called *Parasyte,* and that guy was lying," Yuichi said.

Ibaraki averted his eyes.

With nothing further to say to Ibaraki, Yuichi looked at Kyoya. "So your house arrest is over... I suppose?"

He had been about to say "over, huh?" then revised his language. Kyoya was his elder, after all, and Aiko's brother. He deserved a little respect.

He had heard that Kyoya had been sent into the family dungeon to reflect.

Kyoya shrank away as Yuichi addressed him. "Y-Yeah. That's, ah..."

His behavior seemed rather timid, but to appear before Yuichi again after all that had happened suggested a rather bold personality deep down.

He's acting pretty different, though... Yuichi thought.

Then again, maybe it was the last time they'd met that had been the exception. The stories Aiko had told about her brother before suggested a more frivolous sort of person. Maybe this was closer to the real him.

"Hey, no big deal!" Mutsuko proclaimed. "Yesterday's enemy is today's ally! Oh, but listen up, Yu. Even if he only fights in human form from now on, no pressing him to turn into a wolf or sprout bat wings like before. That's like reminding Hiei of the time he was covered in eyeballs. It's cruel!"

"Lady Mutsuko, would not a Great Ape metaphor be more apt?" Akiko suggested. "Master Kyoya is someone who seemed to appear in the story for the sole purpose of getting redeemed and then

losing to make villains seem stronger, but turned out to be a sensitive and easily wounded person."

Akiko's words weren't helping at all.

"You really don't hold grudges at all, do you, Sis?" Yuichi asked. He looked over at Kanako and Yoriko, wondering if it was okay to talk about this bizarre stuff in front of them. They hadn't been part of that incident at all, and it seemed like it might lead to trouble if they learned about it. Fortunately, they didn't actually seem to care at all.

They probably just think it's more of Sis's usual careless chattering... It was natural that they wouldn't take it seriously.

"Now, let's not stand around talking in the doorway," Akiko said. "I shall show you to your rooms." Perhaps realizing they might stand there chatting away forever, Akiko led them all away from there and to their rooms.

They had decided they would go to play on the beach after they dropped off their luggage, so they all quickly got changed and met up behind the house. They walked through the line of trees planted to prevent sand erosion and came out on the beach.

"Huh? I thought your house would have a private beach, Noro!" Mutsuko exclaimed, acting exaggeratedly shocked by the sight of the beach full of visitors.

Mutsuko was wearing a swimsuit of the competitive racing sort. She didn't have much of a chest, but her proportions were perfectly balanced, like a model's. The suit's silhouette was evocative of a tokusatsu hero, and apparently Mutsuko had had it specially made, though Yuichi didn't know all the details. Annoyingly, she couldn't put it on by herself, so he had had to help her.

"No, of course not," Aiko said. "Apparently all Japanese beaches are owned by the state, so you can't just keep them to yourself. Lots of people with summer homes in the area come here to play, so I guess it gets a lot of traffic."

Aiko was dressed in a frilly bikini, walking side by side with Yuichi. Yuichi's group was getting attention for a number of reasons, but one of them was definitely Aiko.

Perhaps embarrassed by being openly stared at, Aiko was keeping her own eyes fixed on the ground.

It is hard to keep your eyes off her, though... Yuichi thought. Aiko had a round, childish face, but when she wore a swimsuit, it

became clear just how busty she was.

"Boy, it feels great to have all eyes on you, huh? You're sucking in their attention like a black hole!" Ibaraki said. He was wearing a red speedo and absolutely nothing else. Due to his foreign appearance, perhaps, he was getting a lot of attention from the women himself.

"Hahaha! Of course she is!" Kyoya let out a piercing laugh. "She is my little sister, after all!"

"Indeed. All must bow before the sight of the mistress in a swimsuit," Akiko chimed in.

Neither of them were wearing swimsuits; they were still in their straightjacket and maid outfit.

Aiko's eyes remained on the ground.

"So, uh, what are you guys here for, anyway? Well, with Ibaraki I can probably guess..." Yuichi asked curiously. He couldn't understand what the other two would be doing attending their training camp.

"I-I just came to enjoy our summer house! And while I'm at it, I will of course protect my lovely little sister from the boorish ruffians running wild out here beneath the summer sun!"

"Master Yuichi, it is only natural that I should be here. Who else would take care of you during your stay?" Yuichi had heard that the house had a caretaker, who would see to the bare minimum of their needs. She had probably just come to enjoy herself, then.

"Are you okay, Big Brother?" Yoriko asked, clinging to Yuichi's right arm. She was wearing a daring black lace bikini, which she pulled off so well, it was hard to believe she was in middle school. All the girls present were beautiful, but Yoriko was the only one among them who was aware of it. She knew how to be looked at, and how to show off to others.

"No, actually, so could you stop clinging to me?" Yuichi asked. He was wearing long surfer shorts and a soft parka. He also had a strange, long rod mounted over his shoulder. It was apparently a beach umbrella that Mutsuko had prepared.

The real reason Ibaraki had come to the beach house before them was to bring the various tools Mutsuko had readied for the trip. It seemed that Natsuki's stalker, Sakiyama, had helped with the driving, although he himself was nowhere to be seen.

The umbrella was extremely heavy, and Yuichi was walking on

sand, which made keeping his balance hard. Having someone clinging to his arm made it even harder, so he really did wish she would stop.

"That reminds me... you really are a man, Ibaraki!" Mutsuko announced as she scrutinized Ibaraki in his swimsuit. It was a bizarre thing to say.

"Huh? Yeah, I am. Why?" Ibaraki responded, uncertainly.

"You don't know about the Ibaraki-doji female theory?" Mutsuko asked. "There's even one that she's the lover of Shuten-doji!"

"What the hell? That's nuts! Shuten's my brother! Gross!" Ibaraki ran off ahead, apparently offended by the suggestion. Yuichi couldn't help but sympathize.

"This looks like a good spot!" Mutsuko announced, pointing as they came to the water's edge.

Yuichi unfurled the pole he had brought. It looked like a large, Japanese-style umbrella. He stuck it into the sand and affixed it in place.

It was heavy, naturally, so the framework was made of metal. The pole was a total of four meters in length, with one meter of that stuck into the ground. The total diameter of the umbrella was five meters.

The umbrella shook periodically, as if not quite able to withstand its own weight. Yuichi didn't know what it was made of, but it seemed sufficiently pliant so that it wouldn't just break. It did stand out, though — both the umbrella and the people beneath it.

The big, blue ocean spread out before their eyes, and the weather was perfect for beachgoing. Yuichi cast a glance at Mutsuko, assuming she must be feeling satisfied.

Mutsuko looked distinctly unsatisfied. "I worked really hard to get everything ready, but I just don't get the appeal of beachgoing!"

"Hey!" Yuichi couldn't find it in him to work up a more rational objection.

It had been a lot of work, hauling that huge umbrella all the way to the water's edge. It had been long and cumbersome; the sun made the metal scorching to the touch, and he'd had to walk it all along the shifting sands of the beach. And with just one line, Mutsuko had rendered it all pointless.

"Well, it's true! What are we even supposed to do here?!" she complained.

Yuichi wasn't sure what she was mad at, but the brunt of her anger seemed to be directed at Yuichi. She grabbed the pole of the vibrating umbrella in a daunting pose and glared directly at him.

Yuichi just looked at her, losing the nerve to say anything more.

"Um... We could swim?" Aiko suggested.

"Noro!" Mutsuko exclaimed. "What exactly is fun about swimming in the ocean? First, you have to walk through it until your whole body is pruney, and then you're stuck in that slimy salt water! There's nothing good about it! If you want to swim, why not do it in a pool?"

"You just shot down the whole point of beachgoing!" Yuichi shouted, wondering why they had even come if that was how she felt.

"The dictionary definition of beachgoing seems to include both swimming and sunbathing," Kanako said nonchalantly. She was wearing a green pareo to hide her swimsuit, and had plunked herself down at the base of the umbrella. She seemed sensitive about the size of her chest, but her efforts to conceal it had just made it stand out more.

She had carried a small notebook PC even here, perhaps in case she wanted to do some writing for fun. She had used that to look up the definition of beachgoing.

"Sunbathing?! Heatstroke, sunburn, skin cancer, freckles! What's the point of it?" Mutsuko exclaimed.

"What about watermelon-splitting?" Yoriko asked.

"Yu would never miss, so it's boring!" she complained.

It was true that blindfolding him and spinning him around would not have been enough to cause Yuichi to lose track of a watermelon.

"I enjoy the people-watching," Natsuki said. "That's what it comes down to, isn't it? The beach is the only legal venue in which one can scrutinize people walking around mostly naked. Perhaps that's the real fun of beachgoing."

"You sound like a guy, Takeuchi!" Yuichi said.

Natsuki was wearing a concealing pair of indigo separates, their school swim uniform. She clearly didn't care about having fashionable swimwear.

"Fine. What did you actually want to do, Sis?" Yuichi asked, giving up.

Mutsuko glared. "I just associated going to the beach with fun!

But now that we're here, I can't help but feel disappointed! I was all, 'It'll be just like the swimsuit episode in an anime!' but just putting on a swimsuit doesn't actually make this enjoyable!"

"Fair enough," Yuichi conceded. But another part of him still strongly objected to the idea of packing everything up right away. "We only just got here, though. Can we find a way to stick around awhile?"

Mutsuko's lithe body twisted through the air. She brought her palm down in a wide arc and slammed it into the ball.

Crouching on the other end of the spike was Natsuki, who received the ball with locked forearms and sent it rocketing upwards. Then she jumped after it, aiming to spike the ball that she had received herself.

This time, it was Mutsuko who blocked Natsuki's fierce blow, and she sent it flying back at her.

The rules of the game were completely opaque, but they were both clearly taking it very seriously.

"Um, I don't think this quite fits the image of 'beach ball play'..." Yuichi murmured.

Both girls were extremely athletic, so the match was heated, but it was hard to tell how they were ever going to finish it.

The two of them were on Team: Beach Ball Play.

Yuichi had assumed they'd be blowing up a beach ball and batting it around, but the ball Mutsuko had ended up producing was a beach volleyball. It was slightly softer than the kind used in indoor volleyball, but otherwise no different.

Why were they doing this? Because they had decided to try some typical beachgoing activities.

Mutsuko had said that she wasn't enjoying the beach, but she'd apparently agreed that as long as they were there, she should find something to do. They'd used rock paper scissors to assign teams, with each team performing one traditional beachgoing activity.

Aiko and Yoriko were standing in the shallows, splashing water at each other. As one might guess from looking at them, they were Team: Splashing in the Water. They weren't actually doing very much, but the fact that they were both beautiful girls certainly made the sight pleasing to the eye. Whether they themselves were enjoying it was another question entirely.

Ibaraki was making a sandcastle. He was Team: Sand Sculpting.

Ibaraki seemed surprisingly artistic, and was making a very nice-looking sandcastle with the nearby children.

Yuichi was dubious. Ibaraki may like children, but he was still a man-eating oni, and Yuichi couldn't completely wipe away the fear that he was foraging for ingredients.

Kyoya and Akiko weren't dressed in swimsuits, so they couldn't participate in true beach activities. Instead, they had gone off to the beach house to buy provisions. The vampires in the straightjacket and maid uniform made for a terrifyingly mismatched pair. Yuichi didn't want to think what kind of stares they would be getting from those around them for disrupting the beach environment.

The final two were Yuichi and Kanako, who remained under the umbrella.

Yuichi was watching Mutsuko and Natsuki's beach volleyball to distract himself from his current situation, but he couldn't remain like that forever.

Kanako was lying face-down on the vinyl sheet they had placed under the umbrella.

"Um, you don't have to do this if it makes you uncomfortable..." Yuichi said.

It was quite an incredible sight to see Kanako lying face down. Her breasts, crushed beneath her, jutted out to the side. It looked like it couldn't be healthy.

"But we decided these teams with rock paper scissors..." Kanako said, not sounding bothered in the least.

There was suntan oil in Yuichi's hands. In other words, Yuichi and Kanako were Team: Suntan Oil Application.

"I'm not very athletic, so I like being able to just lie here," Kanako said. "Would you rather have a different job, Sakaki the Younger?"

"No, it's not that I don't like this, but..." He felt a little rude saying the words "I don't like this," even if it was part of a denial, but it really did make him self-conscious. As far as he could see, no one else on the beach was doing anything like this. He couldn't remember ever being alone with Kanako before, either. He just didn't know how to deal with it.

But sitting there stewing over it wouldn't solve the problem. Yuichi steeled up his nerve and squeezed some oil into his hand. Once he had enough, he started massaging it onto Kanako's back. Her skin was smoother and softer than he imagined it would be.

“Eek!” she shrieked.

“Ah, was that too cold?”

“No, it’s all right,” she said. “You just surprised me.”

A moment later —

“Eek!”

“Um, it’s really awkward to have you keep screaming like that.”

“I’m sorry, but it tickled,” she said.

How long do I have to keep doing this?! Did he have to spread it over her whole body? Did they just have to go through the motions? Well, now that he had started, if he did a half-baked job, she’d end up getting patches of burns, wouldn’t she? As Yuichi thought about all those things, his eyes strayed to where her breasts had squeezed out on either side of her. He was fairly sure seeing a woman naked wouldn’t faze him, but this was against the rules.

“Sakaki the Younger!” Kanako burst out.

“Y-Yes?” Yuichi started in shock, thinking he had been reprimanded for his straying eyes.

“Just putting the oil on is boring, isn’t it?” she asked. “Let’s talk about something.”

“Oh, all right.” Yuichi was a bit relieved by the suggestion; just putting lotion on her in silence was a getting awkward.

“Have you heard of Potalaka?” she asked.

“Potalaka... is that an isekai, too?” he guessed. Kanako generally only talked about two subjects: her stories, or alternate worlds.

“I’m not sure. It’s said to be where the goddess Kannon lives,” she said. “There used to be a ritual where people would go out to sea in boats searching for Potalaka, so I suppose it must be across the ocean?”

He thought about that. “I don’t really know, but if you can get there by crossing the ocean, it’s probably not an isekai. It must be a part of this world, right?”

“In the ritual, you’re shut up in a box and set adrift on the sea, so it’s like you’re being sent to the afterlife,” she said.

“Wouldn’t that just be suicide?” he asked.

“Yes, it was an act of self-sacrifice. It was considered the ultimate act of penance in Buddhism. Although you can’t really train if you die, can you? But since they went to all the effort to go out on the ocean in boats, I just wondered.” Kanako trailed off for a moment, then offered, “What about Nirai Kanai?”

“I have heard of that one,” he said. “Isn’t that part of the Okinawan religion?”

“It’s said to be across the sea, too... though I don’t think I could make it there.” Kanako gazed out at the ocean. Maybe she was letting her mind drift out to an isekai that lay far beyond.

“Um... Orihara, why do you like alternate world stories so much?” He decided to ask the question that had been on his mind for a while. He had known Kanako for several months now, and while they weren’t particularly close friends, she was a daily part of his life. Maybe it was too forward of him, but it seemed like an okay question to ask.

“Sakaki the Younger, don’t you ever want to go somewhere else?” she asked.

“I... guess not,” he said after a moment’s thought. He couldn’t think of anywhere in particular that he might want to go.

“I see. Do you enjoy your life, Sakaki the Younger?” she asked.

“I’m not sure... I never really thought about it. It’s never boring, I guess.”

“Do you ever suffer?” Kanako asked.

Yuichi thought for a moment about his training with Mutsuko.

But he was doing that voluntarily. While Mutsuko did force the training on him, if pressed, Yuichi couldn't say that he hated it. Despite all he said, he thought Mutsuko was a nice person deep down.

"I've faced hard times before, but it's usually nothing I can't handle," he said. "Well, maybe that's just because I'm still a kid..."

"I see," Kanako said. "I... for a long time, I've wanted to go far away... to a place where nobody knows who I am..."

"Orihara... you aren't enjoying your... um... self?" Yuichi asked. "Enjoying your life" sounded a little too harsh.

"I don't know. Things changed a bit after I met your sister, and I do sometimes enjoy myself... and yet, something still feels wrong. I don't know why." A distant smile formed on Kanako's lips.

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"There! What about that? Hey, Noro! Hey! Hey!" Yoriko said as she splashed Aiko with seawater.

Mutsuko had insisted that characters splashing each other in the water was a necessity in a swimsuit episode, and rock paper scissors had determined them both to be on that team. But Yoriko seemed to be pinpoint focusing her splashes at Aiko's eyes, and Aiko was getting a little annoyed about it.

"What can you do?" Aiko asked. "It's how things ended up."

Aiko followed Yoriko's gaze to where Yuichi and Kanako sat on the vinyl sheet. Kanako was lying face-down, and Yuichi was crouched beside her, massaging her back. They were on Team: Suntan Oil Application.

"What was that? That! I can't believe... ahh, curse my horrible rock paper scissors luck!" Yoriko complained. "No, I mustn't rely on luck! Destiny must be forged with one's own two hands! My rock paper scissors technique is insufficient. I should have trained it!" She was beginning to splash at Aiko even harder than before. "Look at him! He's humiliated! Why must my brother be subject to such mortification?!"

"It doesn't seem that bad..." Aiko did feel a little bit jealous, but being on the suntan oil team would probably have been too embarrassing for her. She was a little grateful to be safely on splashing duty.

"What are you talking about? Look closer... oh, he's so

dreamy!" Yoriko's tone changed halfway through her statement, suddenly sounding deep in the throes of infatuation.

"I'm not going to stare at him..." Aiko muttered.

Yuichi, apparently one for modesty, was wearing a parka. But his body was still well-muscled enough that you could tell at a glance. He wasn't bulging with muscles, but he was very toned. Aiko blushed as she remembered the times he had held her in those arms.

"That's not what I meant! It's... you know... Orihara!" Yoriko complained. "Big Brother, he's... he's very interested in Orihara's breasts!"

"Huh? No, he isn't..." Aiko remembered the date the three of them had gone on together. He had said he didn't want a girlfriend.

"Noro... you can't take things at appearances," Yoriko scolded. "Maybe he's serious about not wanting a girlfriend. But that's different from harboring lusts of the flesh!"

"Lusts of the flesh?" Aiko gasped. What a graphic thing to say. Was that really something a girl in middle school should be talking about? Aiko was at a loss for how to respond.

"Listen to me," Yoriko said sternly. "He may not want a girlfriend, but that's different from feeling sexual urges. He's a pervert, deep down!"

Aiko still wasn't sure how to respond. "Um, is that why you get changed in front of him, Yoriko?"

"Huh?" Yoriko looked at Aiko like she was an idiot.

"Uh?" Aiko fell silent, uncertain. She had assumed that Yoriko was trying to seduce her brother, but apparently she'd been wrong.

"What are you talking about?" Yoriko asked. "That's so gross. He can't react to seeing me naked. What kind of gross brother gets turned on by his little sister? You hear me? I only love my brother because he's good and wholesome and has no interest in my naked body!"

"Ah, I've heard that logic somewhere before..." Aiko said. She seemed to recall Natsuki saying something like that once.

"That's why it's so difficult," Yoriko said. "I'm overflowing with these ambivalent feelings I can't let out."

"Um, where did that come from, all of a sudden?"

"Oh, nothing. Pretend I didn't say that. As I was saying, my brother likes big breasts."

Aiko looked back at Yuichi. Now that Yoriko had mentioned it,

Yuichi did seem to occasionally cast glances at the way Kanako's chest bulged out beneath her.

Aiko cleared her throat. "Speaking of which... when we were searching my brother's room, he immediately homed in on his busty girls magazine collection..."

It had happened after her brother had gone missing, and they had searched his room for clues. There had been books scattered over the room, and the fact that Yuichi had immediately picked a big breast photo book out of the lot was very suspicious.

"Anyway!" Yoriko declared. "I feel like he and Orihara could be developing real chemistry right now. Do you really think this is the time to be splashing each other?!"

"Well, I thought it was okay before, but now..." Aiko said slowly.

The two decided to stop splashing each other and climb back up onto the beach.

Chapter 3: There's a Hot Spring at the Noros' Summer House!

Things were, for the moment, proceeding as planned. But Yuri Konishi still felt a slight pang of anxiety. Would they continue to go this smoothly?

Her first priority had been to restore Takashi's beast form, and he had already undergone the lycanthropy ritual at Kurokami Island.

To think that Aiko Noro and her group might also come there — that she could settle things with her, just as an afterthought — seemed almost too much to hope for.

Yuri Konishi's gaze remained focused on Aiko Noro, splashing around off the shore.

That girl — the "bookseller" — had said that she would set the whole stage. That she would even lure them to Kurokami Island. Yuri didn't know how she had gone about it, but clearly, she had been successful. From Madono Island, Kurokami Island was just a short boat ride away.

"Really, why look a gift horse in the mouth?" Yuri Konishi laughed, shaking off her worries.

She was currently monitoring Aiko Noro and her retinue from up in a tree. Climbing trees was easy for her half-bestial form, which also extended her vision and hearing range.

She was currently in a pine tree about three kilometers away from Aiko and her group. She had cat ears and a tail, and was dressed in a swimsuit. It looked more like a black dress than a swimsuit at first glance, though; the A-line skirt that came off of the waist hid everything down to her ankles. It was probably hard to swim properly in it, but Yuri always put appearances first.

"Now, is it going well for him?" Yuri wondered, turning her eyes out to sea.

She could just barely make out the island. Kurokami Island, the cornerstone of her current plans. By the time Yuri returned there,

Takashi's bestialization would likely be complete.

Yuri gently stroked the notebook in her hand. She had received it from the "bookseller" girl, and it contained information about anthromorphs. It was from this book that she had learned how to restore Takashi's powers.

"I do hope it works, of course..." She hadn't told Takashi this, but Yuri knew that the chance of success was only about 50%. She desperately wanted him to succeed. He was her only henchman at the moment, after all.

Of course, she didn't really believe an anthromorph army of one would be enough to change the world. But it would be the first step. The first step to changing everything — to a world of darkness over which she would reign.

Kurokami Island. Once Aiko and her friends went there, it would all be over.

They would have no way to fight back. Of that much, Yuri was certain.

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Noro's family villa came with a large bathhouse. The bath was an open air hot spring.

Naturally, since it wasn't a commercial facility, there was no divide for men and women. There were also no directions for what to do if a large number of people were using the house at once.

"I think the most natural thing to do would be to break it into shifts. Men's bath time, women's bath time, family bath time," Yoriko proposed.

"Huh? Wait a minute. One of those sounded a little bit odd..." Aiko tilted her head.

"No, it's all perfectly normal," Yoriko insisted. "Ibaraki will use the men's bath time. Orihara and Takeuchi will use the women's bath time. Family bath 1 will be me, my sister, and my brother. Family bath 2 will be you and your brother."

"...Yoriko... that's ridiculous..."

They had returned to the house after a full day of playing on the beach. The survival club members had agreed to each take a turn at cooking. As Aiko and Yoriko were on cooking duty for the first night, they were currently making curry in the kitchen.

"Is it really? I think it's natural for families to bathe together,

don't you?" Yoriko asked.

"Yoriko... do you bathe with your brother every night?" Dubious pictures were beginning to form in the back of Aiko's mind.

"C-Certainly not! He would never allow that! He's very fastidious in that regard! Don't make fun of me!" Yoriko shouted, her cheeks bright crimson.

"Right. I never know what's going to embarrass you, Yoriko." Aiko didn't know what she was so flustered about, but it was rather cute regardless. "But he'd agree to family bath time?"

"Yes. If that's the rule of the household, it's okay to enforce it. 'When in Rome,' after all. So, what do you think?"

"No way. I don't want to take a bath with *my* brother." Aiko thought back. She had vague memories of bathing with her brother, but that had been before she was even in elementary school. There was no way she could go back to that after all this time.

"I suppose you wouldn't," Yoriko said. "Then why don't you join us, Noro? There is the custom of the host sharing her bath with her guests."

"That's even worse," Aiko said. "I think we should just keep the men and women separate."

"I didn't really think it would work," Yoriko sulked. "I just wanted to say it out loud." It sounded like she had really wanted it, though.

Between this and that, though, they eventually finished their preparations for dinner.

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After finishing the curry, the survival club had a discussion.

This one was for members only, so the five who sat around the dinner table were Mutsuko, Kanako, Yuichi, Aiko, and Natsuki. The others had gone back to their rooms early.

"Doing beach-like things eventually made this more fun!" Mutsuko announced. "Maybe we should have played beach tennis, too!"

"Please, no... you'd take it too seriously, Sis," Yuichi said.

When it came to competition, Mutsuko always gave 100%. But she also hated to lose, and she wouldn't let you lose to her on purpose, which made her a very annoying person to play with.

“Anyway! Day one is moving day, so it’s okay to just play around,” Mutsuko said. “But starting tomorrow, we need to train in earnest! The power-up training camp!”

“You just wanted to say ‘power-up training camp,’ right? What exactly would we be powering up? What’s the point of our club having a training camp, anyway?” Yuichi demanded.

All Mutsuko had told them was that they had to go on a training camp. Normally, their club didn’t do much except for sit around and talk, so he couldn’t imagine what a training camp would entail.

“Anyway, we need our front man, Yu, to get stronger!” Mutsuko cried. “That will make our club stronger in general!”

“Are we a sports team now, or something?” Aiko muttered.

“You also need to do some serious soul searching after last time, Yu!” Mutsuko continued. “What *was* that? You started that fight half-cocked, and only got serious after you were up against the wall! You need to unleash all your power from the start!”

Yuichi braced a little under the criticism, wishing she could have said that at the time, instead. But he couldn’t actually argue with her, either.

“You were also too afraid!” Mutsuko pursued. “What’s a vampire? Nothing!”

“Um, hey...” Yuichi glanced over at Kanako, uncertain of whether they should be talking about vampires in her presence.

“Hm?” Their eyes met, and Kanako tilted her head. She didn’t seem to have the slightest idea of what they were talking about.

“So? What do we do?” Natsuki asked Mutsuko.

“Excellent question, Takeuchi!” she responded. “The truth is, there’s a great place right nearby!”

“Yeah, I’ve got a bad feeling about this already...” Yuichi muttered.

“Kurokami Island!” Mutsuko proclaimed. “It’s really close by! We’ll head there tomorrow!”

They would go there by boat, she explained. The Noro family apparently had a private boat, and Akiko could drive it.

Mutsuko looked excited. “There’s a legend that there’s a pirate treasure buried on Kurokami Island! And that they hold mysterious rituals there that outsiders aren’t allowed to witness! And that there are sightings of UFOs and cryptids! And that they worship an evil god that can kill you if you look at it! And that there’s a military

facility where the army did research during the war! And that they have their own unique martial art that's never spread past the island!"

"That's too much stuff! Narrow it down a little!" Yuichi shouted. Naturally, these were all things Mutsuko liked, but it was far too much at once.

"Um... should we really be going to a place with all that weird stuff?" Aiko asked nervously.

Her trepidation was only natural. Even if it wasn't all true, if even half of it was, it could be serious trouble. Yuichi couldn't dismiss it all as nonsense, either.

He knew now that the world was full of vampires and anthromorphs and serial killers who just walked around in society, unnoticed.

"It'll be fine!" Mutsuko insisted.

Yuichi paused, waiting to hear if she had some rationale for that statement.

Nothing came.

"You don't have any basis for that!" he shouted.

"Anyway, who told you all that stuff about it?" Yuichi demanded. Knowing Mutsuko, she may have been researching it for some time, but it still seemed somewhat out of left field.

"Oh, that?" she asked. "Someone wrote a letter to the Traditional Martial Arts Preservation Society."

The Traditional Martial Arts Preservation Society was one of the organizations that Mutsuko ran in her spare time.

A large spate of martial arts forms had begun dying out lately for lack of heirs. Mutsuko had started up her society to combat that. A rare case of Yuichi's sister turning her energy to the benefit of the world at large.

"Wow, someone actually contacted *you*?" Yuichi asked.

Stranger things did happen, Yuichi supposed. Mutsuko's usual MO was to burst into a dojo and collect their secrets by means of force.

"Yes!" Mutsuko said happily. "It seems the island is host to a form of Xiang Xing Quan that was brought over from China and developed in a unique direction there! But recent depopulation means there's no one to inherit it, and it's going to die out pretty soon! So, they wrote to me!"

Xiang Xing Quan referred to martial arts derived from animal

movements.

"So I investigated the island to find out what kind of place it was, and I found out there's tons of interesting stuff there!" Mutsuko added. "How could we *not* go?"

Yuichi had mixed feelings about the Martial Arts Preservation Society. It meant that Mutsuko had knowledge of real martial arts. He really wished that she would teach those to him, rather than the weird fighting style she had cooked up based on manga.

"We'll go camping on the island!" Mutsuko announced. "It'll be survival training! We can put up a tent on some random mountain or in a forest somewhere, and cook for ourselves for three days!"

"Um, I'm sorry. I'm afraid I can't actually go camping," Kanako said, dampening Mutsuko's enthusiasm.

"Huh? How come?" she asked.

"Well, I have a deadline for my book," Kanako explained.

They all knew that Kanako wrote novels, but as far as they knew, she only published them online. What was the deadline for?

"Why can't you just put it off for a few days? Ah, not to say that I take your work lightly, of course..." Aiko said.

Yuichi agreed. A summer training camp seemed like a reasonable excuse for not updating your web novel.

"Oh, actually! Orihara's book was selected for publishing! The Demon Lord one!" Mutsuko exclaimed.

She was referring to Kanako's seminal work, *My Demon Lord Is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World is in Danger!"* AKA *Demon Lord* or *Can't Kill the Demon Lord.* Yuichi had heard that it was picking up a following, but he'd never dreamed that it would get published.

"That's right. I was hoping I could finish it during our training camp, but camping outside would be..." Kanako trailed off apologetically.

"Got it! Orihara, you stay here and focus on your novel! We'll go camping by ourselves! Okay?" Mutsuko stood up, pounding the table. "We head for the island in the morning!"

It wasn't that Yuichi minded going. But he did wish she'd told him about this from the start.

"Let's go peeping on the girls in the bath!"

Yuichi slammed the door in the visitor's face. He wished it would hit him and send him flying, but alas, he wasn't so lucky.

There was another knock. Yuichi had the feeling the knocking

wouldn't stop if he just ignored it, so he had no choice but to open the door. Naturally, it was Ibaraki again.

"Come on, man! Hear me out!"

After the survival club meeting, they had split up and each returned to their own rooms.

"Fine. What do you want?" Yuichi asked shortly.

"To invite you along! Let's go peeping! C'mon!"

They had decided that bath time would be after dinner. The girls would go in first, then the boys.

"Look, half of the girls in there are my sisters. I'm not interested," Yuichi said as he went back into his room.

The room itself was only about ten by ten feet, but as a place to sleep, it did its job well enough. The furnishings it contained seemed appropriate to a historic, old Western mansion.

Ibaraki followed Yuichi into the room, while Yuichi ignored him and sat down on the bed.

"Yuichiiii! This is a thing healthy guys in high school gotta do, y'know?" Ibaraki complained.

"I thought you didn't go to high school," Yuichi retorted.

Ibaraki wore a collared high school uniform, which he apparently hung around town wearing. He had been wearing it the first time they'd met, too, but that didn't mean he went to high school. It was just camouflage to fit in with people better.

"That's not the poooooint!" Ibaraki whined.

"By the way, aren't you an oni?" Yuichi asked. "Do you even like naked human girls?"

"Sure, I do!" Ibaraki said. "I mean, there aren't actually that many of us, so sometimes we've gotta get with human girls to keep the line going."

"I know I asked, but I didn't actually want to hear about your sex life."

"...Listen, you... you keep doing that, and it hurts, y'know?" Ibaraki complained. "Why am I the only one you treat this way, anyway? You're nice to all the girls. You seem pretty respectful of the vampire guy, too."

"Listen," Yuichi said. "I know you're trying to cozy up to me, but do you remember how we met? You tried to kill me, a high school student who had done nothing wrong."

"Takeuchi did the same thing!" he protested. "She tried to kill you, too, remember?"

Actually, Yuichi thought “tried” wasn’t the right word. She was still trying. Natsuki sometimes still attacked him with the intent to kill.

“That’s different. I can handle her, so it’s not a big deal.” Yuichi looked out the window, a thought occurring to him. He didn’t want to let Natsuki kill people, but how long would he have to stick around with her? For now, he was a vent for Natsuki’s killing urges, but she wouldn’t have that option without him in the picture.

“Anyway, that’s not what I came here to talk about,” Ibaraki said. “The bath! Let’s go to the bath!”

“You really shouldn’t—” Yuichi began.

There was a 50-50 chance. Would his sister have put up iron-clad defenses against men peeping into the bath, or would she permit it, as part of the natural trope of a hot springs episode? But just as Yuichi was thinking about that, he suddenly detected a strange presence nearby.

“—Actually, just go on your own. And stick with them, okay?” It was a presence he had felt vaguely on the beach, and several times since then.

“What’s wrong?” Ibaraki asked.

“Something’s here,” Yuichi said. “Anyway, I’ll go check it out. I don’t like asking you for help, but I need you to look after the girls. If you’re going to peep anyway, it’s perfect timing, right?”

“What is with you, man? You’ve got one confused set of morals. Don’t you care if I see your sisters naked?”

“It doesn’t hurt them, does it?” Yuichi asked.

“I’ve never met a guy who said that in real life...”

“I don’t need a lecture from a guy who barged in here talking about peeping...”

Yuichi decided to leave the rest to Ibaraki, and left his room to check on things outside.

*****

The spring water was said to improve skin complexion. It was known as “beauty water,” and it had been diverted here to the Noro family summer house.

“Wow, bigger than I expected!” Aiko cried.

It was an open-air bath. Nearly all of the parts of the mansion were Western-style. The bath was the one taste of pure Japan there.

“You mean Orihara’s breasts?” Natsuki asked, staring at Kanako’s bosom.

“No!” Aiko shouted.

Certainly, Kanako’s breasts *were* large, but Aiko had been talking about the size of the bath. It could fit ten people and still have space left over. There were also several places to wash up.

“Oh? Noro, you don’t have a bath this size at home?” Mutsuko asked. It was an understandable question.

“Nothing this big, no,” she said. “It’s just for one.”

“I see. I guess using something like this every day *would* be more trouble than it’s worth!” The naked Mutsuko made a running jump and dove into the bath.

“Sis! You have to wash off first!” Yoriko called after her.

They all entered the hot water.

Its effect was plain to see right away. Aiko rubbed her skin, feeling how smooth and pleasant it was to the touch.

“Ah, I see why they call it ‘beauty water.’ I really feel like it’s improving my skin.” Aiko had never been in a bath like this before. She hadn’t even known they had a summer house here.

“But it’s fishy somehow!” Mutsuko exclaimed. “To have beauty water and a bath this big... Noro, does your father plan to bring a mistress here or something?!”

“My father is not that kind of person!” Aiko stated, a little annoyed. She was certain that her father was devoted to her mother.

“Sis... that’s extremely rude,” Yoriko jibed.

It seemed that when the sisters were together, Yoriko worked hard to keep Mutsuko in line. Incidentally, Yuichi generally did whatever Mutsuko said, and thus was useless in this regard.

“I haven’t been to a hot spring in so long! When was it last?” Mutsuko chattered on, as if the exchange hadn’t even happened. Aiko was slowly coming to realize that Mutsuko just said whatever popped into her head, and never listened to anyone.

“...But, let’s see... what to do in a hot spring...” Mutsuko went on with a blissful expression, apparently enjoying the hot water.

“We don’t have to do anything, do we? I think we just sit and relax...” Aiko responded, wondering what else there could possibly be.

“No, I feel like there’s some special event that must happen in a

hot spring!" Mutsuko announced.

"Really?" Aiko had no idea what Mutsuko was talking about.

"Yes! Peeping is the usual trope!" Mutsuko cried. "You can't have a hot springs episode without peeping!"

"Peeping? Peeping from where?" Aiko looked all around. She hadn't been particularly cautious up until now, but they *were* outside. It wouldn't be impossible for someone to spy on them. Aiko suddenly felt self-conscious.

"Oh, don't worry!" Mutsuko said. "They usually build these things so they can't be seen easily from outside! My advance recon only caught three places we could be seen from, angle-wise!"

"How is that a 'don't worry' situation? And when did you do, um, 'recon,' exactly?" Aiko asked.

"While you guys were making dinner!"

"So uh, what do we do if the peeping 'event' does happen?" Aiko wondered.

What if Yuichi peeped on them? Aiko's face turned red at the thought, and she sank deep into the bath.

"Of course, there are obstacles to peeping!" Mutsuko exclaimed. "If they think they'll get to peep that easily, they've got another thing coming! But hey, if they can conquer the traps I laid out for them, they deserve to see a little skin, in my opinion!"

"You can't just decide that without asking us!" Aiko shouted, her voice cracking. It was wrong for Mutsuko to put them in that position without any warning. If Mutsuko had asked, of course, Aiko certainly would have been against it.

"Well, no need to worry about the peeping right now," Mutsuko said. "Let's compare breast size!"

"That makes no sense! Why do we have to do that?" Though her breasts had been exposed the entire time prior, Aiko suddenly covered them self-consciously.

"We don't have a choice!" Mutsuko said. "That's what you do at a hot spring!"

"We *do* have a choice! That's not what hot springs are about!" Aiko shouted.

But now that she had made up her mind, there was no stopping Mutsuko. She was side-by-side with Aiko in a flash.

The order turned out to be Kanako, Natsuki, Aiko, Yoriko, then Mutsuko, though the margin between Aiko and Yoriko was slim.

"Orihara, yours are amazing, though! They float!" Mutsuko

didn't seem to mind that she was the smallest in the group. "But what a waste, to have all these amazing treasures here and nothing to use them for!"

"That's right!" Yoriko agreed. "We'd get much better use out of them if we'd had a mixed bath, so we could show them to my brother and make him squeeze them!"

"What is with these sisters?!" Somehow, Aiko felt like the bath was making her more exhausted than before.

"Speaking of which... we've never really talked, have we, Takeuchi?" Yoriko said, suddenly drawing closer to Natsuki.

"Is that so? I don't believe we have anything to talk about," Natsuki replied curtly.

"You're cozying up to my brother, aren't you?" Yoriko asked.

"'Cozying up' is not an accurate description for what I do. Though I've never tried to put the relationship into words." Natsuki seemed perfectly composed. If Yoriko had pressed Aiko like this, she would surely have gotten flustered by now.

"Oh?" Yoriko asked, her eyes piercing. "How would you describe it, then? Pressing up against him with that body you're so proud of?"

Natsuki's curves were certainly worth being proud of; she had an impressive figure.

"H-Hey! Yoriko!" Worried that a fight might break out, Aiko tried to intervene.

"All that I will say is... the 'better use' you were talking about before? Sakaki has squeezed mine." Natsuki hugged herself, hefting her chest up with her arms.

"Ah..." Yoriko stiffened.

"*Hard*."

"Takeuchi?" Aiko asked.

"*Too hard*. It felt incredible. I couldn't move for hours." Natsuki's face glowed with triumph. It was not an expression one saw very often.

"W-Wait... are you... talking about..." Yuichi's fight with Natsuki replayed in Aiko's mind. He had used a Double Crashing Palm strike to finish her off. From the side, it had looked like he was groping her breasts.

"He just shoved you across the room! Stop twisting the events!" Aiko shouted.

Yoriko remained frozen.

“The fact remains that I have had more physical contact with him than either of you,” Natsuki said calmly.

Was she joking around? Was she genuinely trying to lord this over them? Aiko hadn’t talked with Natsuki very much, so she had never seen this side of her before.

“H-He’s... touched my thighs, and carried me in his arms, too...” Aiko stammered, perhaps out of a strange sort of competitiveness.

“Noro?” Yoriko suddenly reactivated, and focused her attention on Aiko. “I’d like to ask you more about that later.”

Aiko wished she hadn’t said anything at all.

“Um...” She was just about to say something else, when she was interrupted by a loud crash outside.

“What could it be?!” Mutsuko’s eyes glistened at the potential sign of trouble.

*****

A little while earlier...

Yuichi had left the summer house to track down the vague presence he had sensed. It was a sweltering night outside, so Yuichi did the best he could to mask his footsteps as he got around behind the villa.

A faint wind was blowing. Yuichi knew more or less where he was going, and kept his target upwind from him.

He focused. The presence was up in a tree. Whatever it was, it was definitely watching the Noro summer house.

Yuichi walked up to the base of the tree. Whoever it was didn’t seem to have noticed him yet.

Now, what to do...

He had located his quarry, but he hadn’t figured out how to deal with it just yet. The minute he started trying to climb the tree, he’d be noticed.

Instead, he gently placed both hands on the trunk. (He didn’t know it, but this was around the same time Aiko was talking about his Double Crashing Palm.)

He steadied his breathing, then released all his power in a single blow.

His hands pierced the tree trunk with a crash. Something fell from the treetop.

Yuichi began judging his timing to kick the tree’s former

occupant out of the air, but one sight of her gave him pause.

It was a girl with cat ears.

"Huh?" As Yuichi hesitated, the girl twisted in the air and landed on all fours. It wasn't just her ears — even the way she moved was like a cat.

But it wasn't just the girl's feline nature that had caused Yuichi's hesitation. It was that she looked just like a girl that he knew. It was his classmate Yuri Konishi, plus cat ears and a tail.

The cat ears were sticking out of her intricately-bound blonde hair. She was wearing a swimsuit that resembled a black dress, and her golden tail stuck out of it, swishing.

Above her head was the label "Anthromorph (Cat)." Previously, it had been "Heiress."

"Um... this might sound crazy, but are you... Konishi?" Yuichi ventured. This was possibly last person he had expected to see when he struck that tree.

"Indeed," she said. "Quite a coincidence, meeting you here."

"A coincidence? You're trying to write this off as coincidence?" Yuichi had never had a real conversation with her, but her personality was more frank than he'd expected. "Fine, we'll say it's a coincidence. But this is still Noro's family property. You can't be here without permission."

"I see. But I don't need permission... if there's no witness to report me!!" Yuri suddenly sprang at him.

She brandished her right hand, readying a broad swing at Yuichi. Yuichi caught sight of the lethal-looking claws at the ends of her fingertips. They were the length of small knives. She was definitely not human.

Yuichi moved away, giving Yuri a wide berth. If he focused too much on the claws, she might hit him with a body blow. She followed up with another desperate left hook, which he dodged by dropping his upper body.

Yuri continued on her trajectory and landed, then turned back to Yuichi.

"What's going on here?" Mutsuko came running towards them, naked except for a bath towel around her.

"Hey! Put some clothes on before you come out here!" Yuichi shouted.

Yuri took Yuichi's moment of distraction to run off.

"What? Were you fighting someone?" Mutsuko asked. "Hey!"

“Go get dressed!” Yuichi ordered her. “I’ll explain everything inside.”

Yuichi kept his senses alert as he returned to the summer house, but all trace of Yuri had vanished. It seemed she had really run away.

*****

Aiko was lying on her guest room bed, gazing up at the ceiling.

She was worried about what Yuichi had told her. It sounded like her life was in danger.

Apparently, Yuichi hadn’t planned to tell Aiko about it at first. But now, with a real-life assassin hanging around, that would be irresponsible.

Yuri Konishi was here.

Of course, it was possible that it was just a coincidence. The Konishi family could very easily have a summer house here, too, and if so, this would be natural place for her to spend her summer vacation.

But if she was sneaking onto her property and spying on them, it had to be more than that. On top of that, she was also an anthromorph.

Aiko didn’t know why Yuri was after her. Yuichi didn’t seem to know much about that, either. He’d just said it would be hard to explain, and it didn’t seem like he’d been lying or trying to cover up something, so Aiko just let it go.

Strangely, she wasn’t particularly worried about her life being in danger. She had convinced herself that Yuichi would protect her.

She imagined the two of them as a princess and her knight in shining armor. If she was really in danger, then Yuichi would stay close and watch out for her. And, while maybe she shouldn’t think that way, she felt like that put her one step ahead of Natsuki.

Oh, what am I thinking... Aiko didn’t even know how Natsuki really felt about Yuichi, yet she had started to think of her as a rival.

But actually... how do I really feel? It was true that she had affection for Yuichi. But how deep did it run? She couldn’t even answer that question.

With the questions turning over and over in her mind, Aiko began to drift off.

She was walking unsteadily down a hallway at night.

There were no lights, but she knew what was around her as easily as if it were daylight.

The darkness didn't matter to Aiko. She could smell Yuichi.

It was the blood — the syrupy sweet smell of blood pulsing under his skin.

Aiko was following Yuichi's smell. With unsteady yet persistent steps, she walked towards where he was.

She heard a voice.

It was the same one that had whispered for her to kill Kyoya.

Now it told her to suck Yuichi's blood. It told her to make him her slave.

In her heart, she knew that it was wrong. But she couldn't fight the temptation. Yuichi would belong to her. Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing, to have him all to herself?

The next thing Aiko knew, she was standing in front of Yuichi. He was in bed, breathing slowly in the rhythms of sleep. He had pushed the covers to the corner of the bed, perhaps because it was such a hot night.

Aiko smiled. Yuichi showed no signs of waking up.

She sat down on the bed and stroked his neck gently. The holes she had put in there once before had healed over. She drew her mouth to the same spot. This time, she would put her mark on him — her proof of ownership — and it would never disappear.

Small fangs grew in Aiko's mouth. She lay down on the bed, her body on top of Yuichi's. Her mouth drew close to his neck.

"What are you doing? I can't let down my guard for a minute! I see I was right to stay up in case of this!" a voice shouted.

Aiko, who had forgotten everything except for Yuichi, froze.

The coverlet shoved into the corner of the bed moved, and Yoriko popped out from underneath it.

Aiko looked at Noriko with eyes glowing red.

"Noro? ...Who are you?!" Yoriko looked back at her in fear.

"...Huh? Yoriko? What is it?" Suddenly, everything snapped into focus, and Aiko was left confused. She wasn't entirely sure where she was. She seemed to be straddling Yuichi, and Yoriko was nearby, yelling at her.

"'What is it'? Th-That's my line! You've got to be kidding me!" Yoriko shouted. "I never thought you'd try to sneak in here at night!

I was on guard for that Takeuchi girl!”

“Huh? Sneak in? Huh?” Aiko asked.

“Were you sleepwalking?” Yoriko finally seemed to realize that Aiko wasn’t fully in her right mind.

“Hey, could you get off of me?” Yuichi asked. He looked at Aiko uncomfortably. It was only natural that he would wake up, with how loudly they were arguing.

“Oh! Um, sorry!” Aiko quickly flew off of him.

Yuichi sat up and scratched his head. He’d just woken up, and he was clearly confused about what was going on. “What are you two doing here?”

“Sorry, I think I was sleepwalking…” That was all that Aiko could say. She had a feeling that she had been dreaming.

Yoriko said, “I-I always sleep in your room, so I felt lonely by myself, and decided to come here with you…”

“Do whatever you want, just be quiet.” With that, Yuichi lay back down and immediately started snoozing again.

Aiko was at a loss for what to do next.

Chapter 4: Welcome to the Mystery-Filled Kurokami Island!

Yuri walked down the curiously bright and wide hallway.

The passage had been carved out in a perfect square, from some unknown, perfectly smooth material. The walls, the floor, and the ceiling all radiated light. Each side was about five meters.

Yuri had been told that it had been a facility used by the old Japanese army, who'd done experiments here on Kurokami Island.

She didn't know if that was true; she found the claim dubious, to be quite frank. She doubted it would be possible to make something like this in the 1940s. Even with modern-day technology, it would likely be very difficult.

As Yuri came to a dead end of the corridor, a square hole noiselessly opened in front of her. Here was something else she didn't understand. How could a hole open up like that, in a wall with no seams?

Yuri stepped through the hole and into the room beyond.

The room was lined with cylinders made of a transparent resin.

Each cylinder was full of a cloudy liquid, and things inside the liquid that squirmed with motion. From time to time, there was a dull bang as one of the somethings knocked hard against its cylinder.

Yuri walked amongst them.

She approached one particular cylinder, and then stopped. She looked at the panel in front of it. It contained a grid of buttons.

Yuri did not recognize the symbols inscribed on the buttons. They weren't part of any language she had ever seen.

Yuri pushed the buttons with the symbols in the order she'd been told.

The cylinder burbled as the cloudy water began to drain out of it, revealing the form of a naked young man.

"I heard it was time," Yuri asked as the cylinder lifted, freeing the young man. "How are you feeling?"

It was Takashi Jonouchi. For a few moments, he looked around in confusion, as if he didn't know where he was. But at last, he fixed his eyes on Yuri in a furious glare.

"You... you! What the hell was this? What are you trying to do to me?!" He seemed to show no respect to someone who was helping him out.

"What am I trying to do? Help you regain your anthromorph powers, of course."

"Like this? Like *this*?!" he shouted.

"What a strange thing to say. What did you think it was going to be? Reciting chants and burning incense? Ridiculous! Did you really think something like that could make you an anthromorph?" she asked.

"That's..."

She had explained to Takashi that the village of the Beast God faith could hold a ritual for him that would turn him into an anthromorph.

She hadn't been lying. This was indeed a village that venerated a god of beasts, and they did indeed hold such a ritual. It was just that the ritual hadn't been at all what Takashi was expecting.

"If... If you could truly believe in it, that method would also have worked," she said. "But as a citizen of modern society, I doubt you put much stock in the ways people used to do things, back in the time of myth and legend. Am I right? The only way a modern man like you would swallow the idea of being turned into an anthromorph would be through the power of biotechnology."

"Really?" he demanded. "I hardly believed it would work at all!"

"But you did think 'perhaps,' didn't you? Injected with drugs, stuck in a vat... it seemed more plausible than some mysterious ritual, didn't it?" Yuri waited for her words to sink in. She intended to use him as a henchman, but he would be useless if he were too rebellious. He needed some degree of acceptance. "It worked for you, so what's the problem?"

"It... worked?" he asked.

"Yes. You're in human form right now, which means it's a success. Would you like to see a failure?" Yuri turned her eyes to the next vat over.

A bloated hand banged repeatedly on the wall of the vat. She had been told that was one of the failures.

“If you’ve recovered sufficiently, we can go above ground again,” she said. “Aiko Noro will be coming soon, it seems. I suggest we go to meet her.”

Takashi stood up and looked down at his palm. Animal fur began growing out of it. His fingernails grew and sharpened, knife-like.

He then willed it back to his normal human hand.

“It’s back... haha... the power is back!” Takashi cried joyfully, all resentment forgotten.

He certainly was self-serving, Yuri thought.

*****

Day two of the training camp was all sunny skies.

Yuichi had spent the morning getting ready for their trip to Mutsuko’s weird island. He was hauling their luggage onto the Noro family cruiser, a large cabin cruiser with two floors, and a large deck on the second floor aft. The first floor contained cabins, as well as a bathroom and shower facilities.

Once they got to Kurokami Island, they’d be camping outdoors, so he had needed to pack tents and sleeping bags and other camping tools.

“Hey, do we need this umbrella?” Yuichi asked, carrying the large paper and steel monstrosity they had used as a beach umbrella the day before.

“I thought we might need it for the beach on the other side!” Mutsuko said, she herself bringing out light things, like cooking utensils.

“Hey, can’t you have Ibaraki carry a *few* of the heavy things?” he complained. Given that the guy had brought a lot of the stuff to the house in the first place, it seemed only appropriate that he should.

“Oh, you didn’t know? Ibaraki is in the dungeon with Noro’s brother,” Mutsuko said.

“The dungeon?! They have one here, too? ...What happened, anyway?”

“They were peeping.”

“Ahh...” Yuichi had been right. It seemed Mutsuko really had had defenses prepared.

“You take a gamble and lose, you have to take the

punishment!" Mutsuko declared.

"How did you find them out, anyway?" Yuichi asked.

"I scouted out the best peeping locations in advance, and set Wooden Men at each of them."

"Those things?" Yuichi wrinkled his nose.

Wooden Men were humanoid figures made from logs: clockwork puppets, of a sort. She had recreated the training dolls she had seen in a kung-fu movie once. Yuichi didn't know how they worked, but they made for seriously tough opponents. They were powerful enough that Yuichi had wondered why he bothered training when she could just send the puppets out to fight instead. She must have been using them like guard dogs. He sympathized with Ibaraki on this one, just a little bit.

"So, what? Are we leaving them behind?" he asked.

"I think we should give them a couple of days to reflect on what they did," Mutsuko said.

Yuichi was surprised that Kyoya had participated in the peeping. Then again, he apparently did like big breasts, so maybe he'd wanted to catch a glimpse at Kanako.

"That's a surprisingly harsh punishment, though," Yuichi said. "I figured you didn't mind being seen naked..."

"That's so rude! I get embarrassed too, you know!"

"Then don't walk around naked!"

Yuichi was referring to the night before, when she had come running out without putting on clothes after hearing Yuichi strike the tree.

"It doesn't count when it's you, Yu!" she said cheerfully.

"No, you should still be a *little* embarrassed in front of your brother," he snorted. "It's a basic decency thing."

They carried one set of luggage after another as they talked. There were lots of other heavy items there besides just the umbrella.

"Is this all of it?" Yuichi asked.

It wasn't yet noon as they finished their preparations, so they had lunch, then headed for the mysterious island in question.

Yuichi and Aiko stood on the prow-side deck, looking out at the ocean. Yuichi was wearing a shirt, jacket, and jeans, while Aiko was wearing a gray dress with frilly sleeves and a white, wide-brimmed hat.

"That hat makes you look kind of like an heiress," Yuichi said.

“Huh? R-Really?” Aiko seemed a little delighted by the comment.

Feeling a little awkward that she was acting so pleased over a mere observation, Yuichi changed the subject: “So who is Akiko, anyway?”

Akiko was driving the boat. It was a surprising sort of thing for an ordinary civilian to have a license to do.

“I don’t know much myself...” Aiko admitted.

Akiko was a maid serving Aiko’s family, and yet Aiko didn’t seem to know much about her.

Yuichi was just thinking maybe they could take it easy until they made it to the island, when Mutsuko and Yoriko appeared, hauling a large trunk behind them.

Mutsuko was wearing a track suit; she’d apparently thought it was the best way to provide that “training camp” atmosphere.

Yoriko was dressed casually in a sleeveless shirt and hot pants. As her brother, Yuichi couldn’t help but worry that she was showing a bit too much skin.

Natsuki followed behind, not helping at all. She was wearing a white blouse and capri pants.

“Okay, Yu! Time to start training!” Mutsuko opened the trunk. It was stuffed with ring-shaped objects. They were about three centimeters thick, and of all different sizes.

Yuichi picked one up. It was very heavy. They seemed like flexible tubes filled with weights. You could get shoes or backpacks full of weights, too.

“Put them on!” she demanded.

“Yeah, yeah. I get it,” he said.

She put him through this sort of training a lot — covering his body with weights to increase resistance. She might intend for him to wear them the entire time they were on the island. Yuichi took off his jacket and obediently did as he was told.

“That’s about 100 kg in all,” Mutsuko said. “I really wanted to give you more weight, but it’s tough to put them on when you can barely move.”

“Um, Mutsuko, will he be okay with all that?” Aiko asked in concern.

“Yeah. This is nothing Yu can’t handle! He does this stuff all the time!” she proclaimed.

Indeed, Yuichi wore things like this on a more-or-less daily

basis. She even had him wear more inconspicuous versions of them to school.

"But the conspicuous ones are even heavier..." Yuichi murmured. He was pretty sure he could still move, though. He experimented with lifting his hands and feet lightly.

"Now, swim in them!"

Thump! Mutsuko gave a light shove to Yuichi's chest.

That small gesture was enough to make Yuichi lose his balance. He hit the hip-level railing, began to tip over it, and reached out a hand reflexively.

Mutsuko ran in and batted the hand away.

Helplessly, Yuichi fell.

He hit the water with a big splash, and sank into the sea. As he sank, the boat moved further and further away.

"Big Brother!" Yoriko screamed.

"Sakaki!" Aiko yelled out in chorus.

But the only one who moved was Natsuki, who dove after Yuichi immediately.

"Ah..."

Yoriko moved to go after her, but Mutsuko grabbed her shoulder to stop her.

"Sis!" Yoriko shouted.

"Don't do it, Yori," she said. "Any more and he's out. If you dive in, it could kill him!"

"Huh? But..."

"With just Takeuchi, he should be able to make it. Any more than that, he could really die."

Yoriko stopped, unable to dive in after hearing that.

"Yu! We're heading on without you!" Mutsuko's voice echoed out over the sea.

It was moving further away.

"G-Give me a break!" Yuichi swam with all his might and poked his face out of the water, shouting. He never dreamed she would actually push him off.

He hadn't thought he was letting his guard down, but Mutsuko knew all of Yuichi's bad habits. She had gotten him completely off-balance.

The first thing Yuichi saw as he surfaced was Natsuki, drowning.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he sputtered.

Her hands and feet were flailing wildly, and she was desperately spitting out the water she was swallowing. Yuichi quickly swam up to Natsuki, but Natsuki threw her arms around him and clung.

He quickly cursed his foolishness for approaching from the front.

“Hey! Wait a minute!” he protested. He couldn’t move with her arms around him like this; she was going to end up drowning her would-be savior.

Eventually, Yuichi managed to pry her off of him and got around behind her.

“Listen to me. First, you need to relax and calm down. You’ll float. You’re not wearing any weights, so you’ll float!” Yuichi strained for the breath to instruct her. He was carrying 100 cruel kilograms on his hands and feet, which were trying relentlessly to drag him to the bottom of the sea.

He hooked his right arm under Natsuki’s side to hold her up. It was in a way that crushed her breasts, but this was an emergency situation... He didn’t exactly have a choice.

First, he put her in a calming posture.

He spread his legs, and alternated kicking out one, then the other. It was an old method for treading water.

“Well? Do you feel any calmer?” he asked.

“I’m okay. Um... sorry.” Since he was behind her, he couldn’t see the expression on her face, but Natsuki’s voice sounded truly apologetic.

“I don’t think you’ve ever said that to me before,” he commented.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I should be. I even know how to swim in a suit of armor... but wow, you can’t swim, Takeuchi?”

“No.” She was being strangely forthright, perhaps because she was aware of how she’d made trouble for him.

“Why did you dive in if you can’t swim?” he asked.

“When I thought you were going to die, my body just moved on its own. Because, you know... I’m the one who’s supposed to kill you. It was sort of a ‘damn you, ocean, don’t take this from me’ feeling, you know?”

“The ocean makes for one hell of a rival...” Yuichi said. Natsuki really did seem to have absorbed a lot of influence from Mutsuko.

“What are we going to do?” Natsuki asked.

“I guess we just have to get to the island.”

“Wouldn’t it be faster to go back?” she asked.

The boat had only just left Madono Island. Going back there would be a lot easier.

“No, we’ll go on,” Yuichi said. “If we turn back now, I’ll feel like I failed.” He wouldn’t even consider taking the weights off, either. At the end of the day, Yuichi wanted to see Mutsuko’s orders through.

“Is this really the time for that?” Natsuki breathed, aghast.

“I know how it looks, but my sister doesn’t demand anything from me that I can’t handle. Which means we should be able to make it.”

Even so, it was a pretty dicey situation. It was 20 kilometers to the island. Swimming that would be tough at the best of times, and he was wearing 100 kg of weight and carrying a girl who couldn’t swim. Plus, they had no food or water.

“We don’t have a whole lot of time to decide...” Yuichi commented. He was worried about Natsuki. Would she be okay coming along with him like this? “Do you want to go back, Takeuchi?”

He could take Takeuchi back to the mainland, then head for the island himself.

“I’ll be okay,” she said. “I’ve got more stamina than a normal person; I just can’t swim.”

Yuichi was still worried about the “can’t swim” part, but he was well aware of Natsuki’s superhuman abilities. “Okay, let’s go. As fast as we can.”

Yuichi began swimming towards Kurokami Island.

*****

Kurokami Island.

The name translated to “Black God Island,” but it could also be interpreted as “Black Hair Island.”

It was a small island in the Sea of Japan, with about ten kilometers of coastline and 70 square kilometers of land. The island had been formed by a nearly circular stratovolcano that set at its

center, to which the Japan Meteorological Agency had provided an activity rank of A.

Even so, it wasn't putting out smoke all the time, and in fact, hadn't had any noteworthy activity in the last few years.

The volcano was nearly at the center of the island, and it was about 400 meters tall. The island's shores were nearly all sheer cliffs, meaning that all entry and exit from the island took place at one small harbor.

The residents referred to the side of the island with the harbor — the side that face the mainland — as the front, and the other side as the back.

The front was all flat fields, and was home to the local residences and their rice paddies.

The back was mostly mountains and forests, so wasn't suited to habitation. The family that controlled the island had declared that area off limits.

Despite the island's isolated nature, about 300 people still lived there, scraping out a living.

None of this made it sound like a very interesting place to visit, but as Mutsuko said, there were quite a few legends surrounding it.

There was a legend that foreign pirates had set up a settlement there during the Genroku period, hidden their ill-gotten gains there after years of plundering, then disappeared without a trace.

Another rumor claimed that the Japanese Imperial Army had used the island for weapons research, and that the island had been erased from the maps of the time due to its top-secret nature.

Further rumors suggested that UFOs had been seen landing on the island, and that yokai and monsters had been sighted there, as well.

A final rumor declared that the island was host to a monstrous deity, and that strange rituals were held to venerate it. The island's residents firmly denied this, though, so it remained mere hearsay.

The only way to get to the island was by sea, but without regular ferry service, those few people who knew about the island would have to charter their own boats if they wanted to get there.

It was upon this island that the survival club — minus Yuichi and Natsuki — finally made landfall.

Their journey to Kurokami Island had taken about an hour in total. It was still early afternoon, and so the sun beat down hot

upon them.

"Um, won't it be hard to unpack everything without Sakaki here?" Aiko asked uncertainly as they stepped out onto Kurokami Island's small harbor. The sight of the piles of luggage strewn haphazardly across the deck was extremely demotivating.

"Ahh! I never thought of that!" Mutsuko exclaimed.

Mutsuko could plan all kinds of pointless things far in advance, even while these sorts of points often slipped her mind. But she had no intention of going back for the two they'd left behind. Instead, Mutsuko, Yoriko, Aiko, and Akiko all worked together, and eventually got all of the luggage off of the boat.

Aiko looked around. The harbor was quiet, without a single person in sight.

There were two of what looked like fishing boats docked at the pier. Aiko wondered idly how it was that the residents came back and forth from the mainland without any regular ferries. Maybe they very rarely left?

"Well, we'll haul it the rest of the way after Yu gets here," Mutsuko said. "Thanks for all your hard work, Akiko! Could you come back and get us again at noon in three days?"

"Are you certain you wish me to go? I would not mind waiting here." Akiko, every bit the maid, gazed in concern at Mutsuko. There were cabins on the cruiser, so she could sleep there if she had to.

"I don't think it makes good training for Yu if we can just go back at any time!" Mutsuko proclaimed.

"Um... will Sakaki really come here? You don't think he'll go back to the house? It was a little unreasonable to expect him to swim this far..." Aiko asked.

"Ah..." Mutsuko froze up for a second, apparently having not considered this possibility, either.

"Don't worry! He's not the kind of person who would just turn back," Yoriko said to her in a reassuring tone.

"That's right! Yu's a guy who sees things through!" Mutsuko cried.

Aiko wasn't so sure. If that was what they had inflicted on him at the start, then surely even worse training was awaiting him after he arrived on the island. Anyone would try to avoid something like that.

Akiko checked once more, then went back into the cabin

cruiser. They wouldn't be able to leave this island for three days.

Aiko checked her smartphone. At least they still seemed to get reception; maybe there was a base station on this island. If worst came to worst, they could still call someone. Aiko felt a little better.

"Now, who knows what we'll find on this island?" Mutsuko asked. "I can't wait to see! What if there's a resistance group fighting vampires with logs?"

"I really hope there isn't, personally..." Aiko said.

Why logs? Aiko wondered.

"By the way, what are we going to do here?" she added.

"Put simply, it's survival training," Mutsuko said. "Well, for us it'll be more like camping. We'll be out in the mountains looking for edible plants and mushrooms and stuff, and create simple traps to catch animals and fish and stuff like that."

"...So we'll be doing different things from Sakaki?" Aiko asked.

"Yeah. I expect Yu to survive on the mountain by himself!"

"Without any tools?!"

"Of course! It's all about the worst case scenario! Of course, he'll be allowed to have his clothing, but I'm going to limit his sight!"

It occurred to Aiko that having to swim in weighted clothing might actually be preferable. Her senses were going a bit numb.

"Anyway, let's take the minimum amount we need and look for a place to set up the tent!" Mutsuko said.

Aiko picked up some smaller things and started walking, but immediately stopped.

At some point, a boy and a girl had appeared on the pier.

Since it was an inhabited island, of course, it wasn't surprising that there were people around. It was the identity of one of the people that surprised Aiko, though perhaps it shouldn't have.

Yuri Konishi was standing there in a flashy summer dress, alongside a boy who looked vaguely familiar. Aiko knew Yuri somewhat, since their families socialized, but they hadn't talked very often.

The boy, on the other hand, she couldn't recognize immediately. Judging by his fine clothes, she thought, he may have been related to the Konishi family... but then she remembered: he was the boy Natsuki had blown off when he'd asked her out.

"Um, Konishi?" Aiko asked trepidatiously. Yuichi had told Aiko that he had come upon Yuri watching her family villa, and that she

had attacked him. Aiko didn't understand completely what that meant, but it had still been unsettling.

"Why, hello there, Noro!" Yuri said. "How are you?"

"Um, what are you doing here?" Aiko asked.

"What am *I* doing here? I'd love to explain, but it might take a while. Could we save it for later? Though given what's lying in wait for you, you might not be in any state to hear it then..."

Yuri apparently had no intention of explaining. Aiko looked at the boy.

"It's been a while, Noro," the boy said. He sounded like he knew her, but Aiko couldn't remember ever speaking to him.

"Um... have we met before?" she asked.

"...I'm Takashi Jonouchi. You don't remember me?" Takashi asked, stiffening.

"Oh! From Jonouchi Pharmaceuticals? You work with my father, right?" Of course she had heard of Jonouchi Pharmaceuticals. They must know each other through the hospital her father ran.

"...You really don't remember me?" He sighed. "I didn't think I'd be forgotten to this degree..."

The moment the words were out of his mouth, Takashi's body pitched forward. She could see his body begin to swell with power.

His muscles bulged outwards, ripping his clothing to shreds. Then gray fur began to grow all over his body. His face transformed into that of a dog's, reminiscent of the monsters that had attacked them at the Chinese restaurant.

Aiko was dumbstruck by Takashi's transformation, and the next thing she knew, they were surrounded by anthromorphs.

Dogs, cats, weasels, bears, foxes... All the faces were different. The main thing they had in common was that, despite being covered by fur, they were bipedal and humanoid.

"Really, Noro, it's nothing personal," Yuri said cockily. "But please give up and consider this all the will of fate."

What should she do in a situation like this?

If only Sakaki were here...

He would do something, surely. But there was no way he'd arrive soon enough.

Aiko looked at her allies.

Mutsuko was whipping her head all around, eyes shining with curiosity.

Yoriko was, naturally, frightened. She had probably never seen anything as ostentatiously strange as these beastmen before.

"In all honesty, I'd love to kill you here. But my patron has asked for you to be taken in alive, you see..." Yuri gave the sign.

The beastmen slowly sidled up to them.

"I guess we've just gotta get caught for now, huh? Even if we ran away, we couldn't keep it up long," Mutsuko said. "Well, once Yu gets here, that's when things really kick off."

Somehow, Mutsuko sounded like she was enjoying herself.

*****

Yuichi was using a technique known as the sidestroke. He was holding Natsuki with his right arm, but by straining every other part of his body to its limit, he was managing to make progress.

There was no time to waste. He had to reach the island while his stamina, and the light, held out.

It had been just after noon when he'd been thrown off the boat, and it was summer, so the sun wouldn't go down until around 7:00. Which meant he had to swim 20 kilometers in seven hours. In normal circumstances, that might not have been a problem, but it would be tricky in his current condition.

The sunlight and irregular waves were slowly sapping his energy. The weights and the ocean water put a burden on his whole body.

But Yuichi had been through hard times like this before. The only thing different this time was the burden he was wearing on his arms and legs.

Silently, Yuichi continued swimming.

"Hey, Sakaki," Natsuki said.

"What is it? Any problem?" But even if there was, there was nothing they could do until he finished swimming them to the island.

"I'm bored."

"Come on! Is that all you have to say?" Yuichi asked.

"I'm suffering the indignity of letting you grope my chest, aren't I? Talking to me is the least you could do."

Now that she mentioned it, trying to pretend like he hadn't noticed wasn't going to work. He couldn't help but think about the way his arm twisted and contorted Natsuki's soft bosom each time

he made a stroke.

"Don't put it like that! But, sorry... It's true that I haven't been very considerate," Yuichi said. Indeed, just swimming in silence would drive anyone out of their mind. "But I'm not sure what to talk about..."

Yuichi didn't know much about Natsuki. They went to club meetings together, but they didn't talk much. And even when she dropped by Yuichi's training, all they did was fight. All Yuichi knew about Natsuki was that she was a serial killer, and that she was very strong.

"Hey, if you wanted to kill me, it would be pretty easy now, wouldn't it?" he said. It was the only thing that came to mind. There was probably a more normal subject he could have picked, but after all his thinking, that was what he ended up with.

"If I killed you now, I'd drown," Natsuki said. "And as I told you before, it's not satisfying to kill someone who can't resist."

"About that..." he said. "It's something I've never understood. Why do you have to kill people at all?"

"I was ordered to 'devour this species,'" she said.

"Hey, that's going around a lot lately, huh? Ibaraki quoted *Parasyte,* too."

"...How humiliating. To have to share material with him..."

"Hey, don't actually get mad about it..."

"It's the truth, anyway," Natsuki said. "I've had someone living inside me for as long as I can remember."

"You mean... Jack the Ripper?" he asked.

Jack the Ripper. The terrible serial killer who'd terrorized London long ago. For a time, that had been the label that had hung over Natsuki's head, for reasons he didn't understand.

Natsuki used surgical scalpels when she fought. They were Jack the Ripper's weapon of choice, so clearly there was a connection.

Ibaraki had suggested there were others who named themselves after famous serial killers, too. That worried Yuichi. Ever since he'd begun seeing those strange words, he'd gotten mixed up in a lot of strange incidents. There was a chance he could end up running into another of those serial killers.

"I don't know," she said. "That's what he seems to think of himself as... which isn't to say that I can distinguish his thoughts from mine. His hunger is my hunger. That hunger expresses itself as the urge to kill... and it seems that's directed at you, for the

moment."

"You make it all sound so matter-of-fact..."

"I don't really understand it, either," Natsuki said. "But it seems the killer inside me isn't interested in killing anyone but you right now. So you can rest easy. I won't kill anyone until I kill you."

"What the hell? Does that mean I have to stay with you forever?" Yuichi felt weary. Now that he knew Natsuki, he couldn't let her kill anyone else. Which suggested that she would be completely dependent on him from now on. He hadn't realized it before, but it was looking like he might need to take drastic measures at some point.

Natsuki chuckled. "You're quite confident. It's like you don't think it's possible that you might just die."

"After everything that's happened, I can't just let you kill me," Yuichi said. "I'll stay with you as long as I can."

"Can I interpret that as a proposal?"

"Why would you?! Why would I marry someone trying to kill me? What kind of bloodthirsty marriage would that be?"

"But it's till death do us part, isn't it? That's the marriage vow. For better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part."

"Oh... fine, whatever," he muttered. "Anyway, there must be some way. There's a lot of weird things out there, so there must be some way to make you a normal person, right?"

Yuichi really wanted some way out of having to keep fighting Natsuki until he grew old and died.

"A normal person... hmm. If there was a way, I'd love to hear it..." Natsuki sounded rather sad. "It's not as if I'm doing this because I like it. I want to have friends, too. I want to live a happy life as a normal person, just like anyone."

"Really? You seem to treat 'normal people' as a different class from you. Why don't you try to get closer to them? You build all these walls..." Yuichi had never seen Natsuki make the effort to really get along with anyone.

"In that regard, you build walls between you and me, don't you?" she asked.

"I would be lying if I said I didn't." Yuichi was being honest in that respect. He couldn't put her murdering past behind him.

"I don't like that part of it either, but I don't worry about it too much," he continued. "Trying to push human legal rules onto

otherworldly beings seems pretty pointless. If someone dies somewhere in the world, it's not my problem. It's not that different from hearing about the kids starving to death in foreign countries."

The words seemed heartless, but in the real world, people couldn't worry about every little thing. You couldn't save people you'd never seen or known about.

"Also, if you were human, what you've got could be classified as schizophrenia, right?" he asked. "Legally, crimes committed when you're not in your right mind don't count."

The 39th article of the legal code stated that the mentally ill weren't considered culpable for their crimes. It was a controversial law.

"Thanks," Natsuki said.

The sudden words caused Yuichi to stiffen. "Why thank me?"

"I feel like you're trying to make me feel better. You want to protect me. I appreciate that."

"Sh-Shut up! It's just that I'm bored, too."

"Tsundere?"

"There's no 'dere' there!" Yuichi screamed awkwardly.

He could tell that his words had truly made Natsuki very happy. After a moment of self-consciousness, Yuichi focused on his swimming once again.

A little while passed in silence before Natsuki addressed him again. "That's clearly unnatural, isn't it? What do you think it is?"

"What do I think *what* is?" They were both facing in nearly the same direction, so he realized what she had meant at once.

There was something in the water, moving at such high speed that it kicked up a spray of water behind it.

Just like Yuichi and Natsuki, it was heading in the direction of Kurokami Island.

"You don't think it's... a shark, do you?" Yuichi gritted his teeth. He knew a few things about how to fight in the water, but his options would be limited as long as he was holding Natsuki. He'd need to let her go and finish it off in a single hit for them to stand any chance.

Suddenly, the thing seemed to notice Yuichi and Natsuki, and changed course to make a beeline towards them.

"A dog?" he wondered. It did look like a dog. A dog with black fur pasted to its body in a way that gave it a slightly wilted look.

Once it was close enough, Yuichi could make out the words

above its head.

"Fenrir."

He had no idea what that meant, but like "Nihao the China," it sounded like it must be some sort of description.

For a second, Yuichi felt sure that they were in real danger. The aura it was giving off suggested extraordinary power.

Not good!

He vacillated. He'd need to make a split-second decision about how to deal with it.

The dog, however, didn't seem to notice Yuichi's alarm in the slightest. Once it got close enough, it matched his speed and began swimming parallel with him.

"Hey," the dog addressed him. It looked like an anthromorph, with a canine face on top of a body that was more or less human. It was also quite large. "Is that Kurokami Island?"

The anthromorph dog-paddled with one paw while the other pointed to the land mass that was coming into view. Yuichi hadn't realized it had gotten so close.

"I think so?" Yuichi just answered the question honestly.

"I see. Thanks a lot." With that, the anthromorph picked up speed again and headed straight for the island.

"What the heck just happened there?" Yuichi murmured once the creature was out of sight.

Chapter 5: Leave the Anthromorph-Slaying to the Serial Killer!

Yuichi arrived on the island just before sundown.

"Graaaah!" With one final burst of strength, he pulled himself up on the pier. Once he was up, he released Natsuki, rolled onto his back and went limp.

He checked the time. It was 6:00 PM. He had been swimming for close to five hours with nothing to eat or drink. Understandably, he was exhausted.

"Are you okay?" Natsuki asked him in concern. She was just as soaked as he was, which just happened to render her white blouse completely see-through. But he was in no mood to think about that at the moment.

"I'm not okay at all... where are the others, anyway?" he asked.

"They don't seem to be in the area."

"...You'd think I'd get a little more appreciation..." he murmured. Mutsuko was one thing, but he'd thought at least Yoriko and Aiko would come to greet him. It was a big disappointment.

"You did very well." Natsuki squished Yuichi's wet hair around. It was a small gesture, but it did make Yuichi feel better.

Of course, feelings were only that. It didn't change the state he was in.

He was at his limit. He could barely move. He'd hit the wall. He'd also hit low blood sugar, due to hunger.

There was no way he could get his body to listen to him now. He could hardly even think straight.

Still, he began to realize, there was definitely something strange going on. Mutsuko should have known he'd arrive in this condition and made preparations.

"...Hey, is there any food or water nearby?" he asked.

Anything would do. The island was inhabited, so there must be something.

"Hang on, I'll look around." Natsuki left and returned after a

while. It was faster than he expected; she couldn't even have left the harbor.

"Here." Natsuki offered him a nutritional supplement bar and a plastic bottle.

Yuichi took them with trembling hands, crammed the supplement into his mouth, and washed it down with the water.

That calmed him down a bit. Slowly, he sat up.

"There's more. Eat lots." Natsuki handed him all the supplements she was carrying.

"Thanks... where did these come from?" Yuichi asked.

"They were over there."

Left by Mutsuko, Yuichi thought. Still, that was a pretty detached way of doing things. It wasn't like her.

Regardless, he needed to eat them and recover. Yuichi stuffed as much food as he could into his mouth. "You eat too, Takeuchi. You're hungry, aren't you?"

At his urging, Natsuki ate one of the supplements, as well. Although she had been carried the whole way, just being in the water consumed a lot of a person's energy.

"We'd better change our clothes fast, or we'll freeze to death," Yuichi said. Even though it was summer, the temperature would still drop once the sun went down. They might lose all the energy they had recovered.

Feeling quite a lot better now, he finally stood up.

"Look at this... There's definitely something strange going on," Yuichi noticed.

The luggage was piled up nearby in a haphazard heap. The tents, the utensils, and all the food... even the bags with changes of clothes had just been left where they were. There was one open bag, and it was full of the nutritional supplements from before.

"I brought them from here," Natsuki said as she followed him.

"I wonder where they are and what they're doing," Yuichi said. It looked like they'd just left all their luggage behind. "For now, let's just get changed. Your luggage is there, right, Takeuchi?"

Yuichi picked up the bag that contained his change of clothes, and looked around for a place where they could get changed.

Natsuki carelessly removed her blouse.

"Hey! You can't get changed here!" he exclaimed.

"No one else is watching. You should get changed right away, too," she said.

“Why are all the women I know so indiscreet...” He already had two sisters who felt comfortable getting naked in front of him. Learning that Natsuki was the same way was kind of disappointing.

But realizing this was no time for modesty, Yuichi steeled his nerve. He stripped off the weights along with his wet clothes and underwear, wiped dry, then put on a new shirt and jeans.

He considerately kept turned away from Natsuki the whole time.

After a while, he decided it must be safe, and turned around.

Natsuki stood there, dressed in a full-body black leather bondage outfit. It was covered all over with what looked like holsters, with medical scalpels mounted in each.

“Um, Takeuchi?” Yuichi was utterly dumbstruck. He couldn’t help but be impressed.

“Sakaki,” she said. “You understand the situation, right? Is the blood not properly flowing to your brain yet?”

“Huh?” It was true his head wasn’t working right. The gears in his brain had slowed tremendously.

“I thought so,” she said. “You need to snap out of it. They wouldn’t have just left their luggage out here. They must have been taken by someone.”

“Taken by whom?” he asked.

“Why don’t we ask them?” Natsuki pointed.

Yuichi turned to look...

A cow was standing there. Above its head was the label “Anthromorph (Cow).”

Actually, it was more like a person with a cow’s head. The black and white blotches suggested a Holstein, and the chest was especially large, suggesting that it was a female.

Yuichi knew another word for a creature like this: a Minotaur, the bull-headed monster from Greek legend.

Next to it was “Anthromorph (Pig)” which had a pig’s head, and brought to mind a certain character from Saiyuki.

An elephant-headed creature that evoked the god Ganesha bore the label “Anthromorph (Elephant),” while another resembled a white equine. At first, Yuichi thought this one had a horse’s head, but there was a horn growing from his forehead. The label said “Anthromorph (Unicorn),” so that was probably right.

There was also another with a canine head, similar to what he had seen before. Although this one technically said “Anthromorph

(Dog)," it was hard to tell it apart from the werewolves.

Up until now, they had all been mammals, but there was also an "Anthromorph (Snake)" that had a snake's head, bending forward on a long neck.

Though a chaotic assortment, they were all anthromorphs. It felt vaguely like a fairy tale had broken out around him.

Yuichi realized that he was currently not fully in his right mind. It was a shock to realize he hadn't noticed so many obvious presences in the vicinity.

"Not good... I haven't recovered at all," he murmured.

First, he needed a way to force his condition back to normal. Yuichi began to focus his breathing...

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Aiko and the others had been captured without resistance. They were totally outnumbered, and they knew that a little struggling wouldn't change anything.

Fortunately, their opponents were apparently quite confident in their ability to keep the prisoners in line, so they hadn't felt obligated to rough them up at all. They clearly thought that if their prisoners tried to run or resist, they could easily put them down.

The girls had left their luggage out in the open when they had taken it off the boat, but the anthromorphs had shown no interest in it, only bothering to confiscate their cell phones, watches, and such. Afterward, they were taken by car to the anthromorphs' headquarters.

Kurokami Island's most distinguishing feature was the volcano that towered over it. It got higher and higher up as one moved towards the center, and about halfway up the slope squatted a peculiar Japanese-style mansion.

Its inconsistent architectural style suggested a building that had been added to repeatedly over time, but it was large enough that it was hard to take in the full scope of it at a glance.

The minute they got inside, Aiko could tell that something had changed in the air around them. It felt kind of slimy, kind of sticky. There was a sour smell about the place; it made her skin crawl just standing there.

They were led deeper inside.

It was dim there, with only naked light bulbs to provide light. It

was hard to say if that was intentional, but it meant that there was always darkness somewhere around them.

How long had they been walking? It was around the time that Aiko had completely lost track of their current position that they appeared to arrive at their destination.

It was a sliding door prison — a Japanese-style room lined with wooden lattices.

They were sent inside of it, and naturally, the door was locked behind them.

Their only guard was a single human man who sat in front of the door. But he was most likely an anthromorph, and could transform if he had to.

“What’s gonna happen to us?” Aiko asked with a sigh as she took a seat on the tatami floor.

She genuinely had no idea what was going on. They had come to the little isolated island for their training camp, and minutes later, monsters had appeared and locked them up. This was not what she had been expecting, to say the least.

Mutsuko, for her part, seemed unaffected. “Whatever will happen, will happen! For now, let’s take it easy and wait and see.” She lay down on the tatami floor, completely at ease in this situation.

“How are we going to go to the bathroom?” Yoriko asked, inspecting the room. Apparently, she wasn’t scared anymore, either.

“The toilet is... there,” said a voice from somewhere in the room’s dim light.

Surprised, Aiko looked towards it, and saw two girls squatting there. One was pointing towards a door. It seemed there was a toilet, at least.

“They’ll feed you, too. At least, a little bit. We’re sacrifices, apparently, so I guess they don’t mind if we look a little scrawny...” the other girl said with a trace of sarcasm.

“Um, who are you guys?” Aiko asked hesitantly.

“I’m Akemi,” the girl with the ponytail said. “That’s Manaka.”

So the girl with the ponytail was Akemi, and the girl with long hair who had pointed out the toilet was Manaka. That was how Aiko memorized them. They both looked older than her — they were probably out of high school, at least — and were both dressed in simple kimonos that looked like pajamas.

“Did you say... sacrifices?” Aiko repeated.

“Seems so,” Akemi said. “At the next full moon, they’re holding a festival to their god, and we’re the tribute. So I guess we get to live until then? We’ve got futons, and some changes of clothes if you don’t mind stuff like this... It’s pretty awkward to have that guy leering at us all the time, but otherwise they take pretty good care of us.”

The girls were in college, it seemed. Five of them had come to Madono Island for summer vacation. They had fallen asleep in their inn, and when they’d awakened, they’d been trapped in here. Which meant that the girls didn’t even know that they were on a remote island called Kurokami.

“A remote island, huh? Which means even if we get out of here, we can’t get back home...” Akemi said, sounding less frustrated about it than one might think. She must have already resigned herself to the situation.

“There were five of you, you said?” Aiko asked.

“Yeah. So why are there only two of us here, you mean? Are you guys virgins?”

“U-Um?” Aiko asked, wondering if she’d heard the girl right.

“I asked if you’re virgins.”

The second time she was asked the question, Aiko looked around, confirming the responses of her fellow club members.

“Well, yes, but what does that have to do with anything?” Aiko whispered self-consciously.

“I think they’re putting the virgins in here,” Akemi explained. “The other three played around a lot... and virgins and sacrifices usually go together, you know?”

“Ah...” Aiko wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“Bingo,” the man sitting outside the prison spoke up suddenly in a voice that somehow felt as sticky as the air around them.

“Boy, what a shame,” he continued. “I thought all high school girls these days played around.”

Chills ran up Aiko’s spine as she felt the man undress her with his eyes.

“Wanna know what happened to the other three?” There was a sadistic tone to his voice that made their fate easy to imagine.

“No! Don’t say it!” Manaka screamed, covering her ears.

The man didn’t seem to want to have to deal with her starting a fuss, so he didn’t say anything more. Aiko was glad for that; she didn’t want to hear any more of the man’s cruel words, either.

“Hey! Why don’t we do some image training, like Gohan and Krillin in *Dragon Ball Z?* It really kills the time during situations like this!” Mutsuko happily shattered the mood.

“Um, Mutsuko?” Aiko ventured.

“Noro! It’ll be fine, so relax, okay? Once Yu gets here, everything’s gonna work out! We’ve just got a lot of time to kill until then, that’s all. Wanna play Word Chain? What about you guys? Manaka, Akemi?” Mutsuko blithely called to the two college girls.

“Mutsuko and I aren’t worried, so you can calm down, too, Noro,” Yoriko said haughtily. “Of course, the situation being what it is, I’ll be a bit nicer to you.”

Aiko was starting to feel like she was the silly one for worrying.

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Yuichi regulated his breathing, using that to force his body into fighting condition.

He couldn’t tell if the anthromorphs around them were friend or foe yet, so he wouldn’t necessarily have to fight. But if he did, he had to be prepared.

“Kill the man. The woman’s a virgin, so we’ll take her,” said the unicorn anthromorph, who was apparently their leader.

Those words confirmed to Yuichi that these were enemies.

“Your special skill is so creepy! What the heck?! I know you’re a unicorn, but still! It’s so gross that you can tell that by smell!” the cow told the unicorn. She sounded like she really meant it; they must not have been particularly good friends.

“They’re fighting with each other...” Yuichi whispered.

“Don’t let your guard down,” Natsuki responded quickly.

“Shut up, virgin!” the unicorn guy snapped. “How can you be a virgin with tits like that, anyway? Give me a break...”

“That’s sexual harassment! Knock it off or I’ll sue!”

The other anthromorphs just watched as the cow and the unicorn bickered.

It didn’t look like they were going to be fighting right away, so Yuichi evaluated his situation again. They were standing in the middle of a pier about ten meters wide, sticking out from the land over the ocean.

Jumping into the water would be the easiest escape route. But

given Yuichi's weakened state, he wasn't sure how far they could get.

The anthromorphs had fanned out in front of them, as if to cut off any escape route further onto land. From left to right, it was pig, cow, horse, elephant, snake, and dog.

"What should we do?" Yuichi murmured. "I don't think I can fight for very long..."

"We'll just have to beat them all," Natsuki agreed. "From what I can see, there are six here right now. I don't see any sign of reinforcements, but if any get away, they might call for some. If we want the freedom to search the island for the rest of our club members, we'll have to beat every last one of them."

"Yeah, I guess that's what it comes down to," Yuichi agreed. "It wouldn't be hard to knock one or two of them down and make a run for it, but that would lead to trouble later..."

Yuichi wasn't sure he could hold out long enough to beat them all, though, which was why he had asked Natsuki for advice. But it seemed she had an answer to that, too.

She took one step in front of Yuichi.

In response to that, the cow and the horse realized their prey was getting ready to fight, and they stopped their bickering.

Natsuki reached behind her with both hands and picked out as many scalpels as she could hold.

The anthromorphs were just about to move when Natsuki swung her arms forward as hard as she could.

The follow-through posture was like the unfurling of wings. The scalpels went flying, drawing red lines behind them. It was hard to tell if the anthromorphs even saw them.

One scalpel opened a hole in the elephant's face, while another took off the unicorn's head. A third and a fourth cut open the dog's stomach and bisected the snake's head.

Following Natsuki's throw, Yuichi leaped into action, running after the scalpels. He got around behind the uninjured cow and pig and thrust the heel of his palm at each. Both fell to the ground with a dull smack.

With the anthromorphs neutralized, Yuichi fell limply to the ground.

He really was still hungry. Yuichi needed more food than you would expect for a young man of his size and build. Though the

dietary supplements had given him the vitamins he needed, they hadn't had a lot of calories.

He looked over at one of the scalpels, which had hit the ground nearby. There was a red string attached to its handle. That must have been why they seemed to trail red.

"Ah, that's something the club president taught me," Natsuki said.

Putting strings on throwing weapons was a wise move, Yuichi reflected. It made them fly straighter.

"A little risky, wasn't it? It's hard to put a lot of power behind a thrown scalpel..." Yuichi said, looking over the tragic state of the anthromorphs.

"You remember I can cut through steel, don't you?" Natsuki asked. "At this range, even if they're not in my hand, I can still put considerable power behind them."

As a thrown weapon attack, it would be hard to defend against. Yuichi remembered the first time he had fought Natsuki, and he had to admit that it was definitely a troublesome attack.

"So what's with the outfit?" he asked.

Natsuki was wearing a black leather bodysuit that clung to her curves. He had wondered the same thing when she'd come to training in a leotard, but she looked even more like an assassin now.

"The club president prepared it," Natsuki said. "It's convenient. It holds a lot of scalpels."

"Sis, what are you getting up to now...?" Yuichi muttered. It didn't seem like the kind of thing you could buy in a store, so Mutsuko must have designed it and had it made somewhere.

"Are they alive?" Natsuki asked as she looked at the cow and the pig. They had returned to human form, perhaps due to having lost consciousness. One was a girl with a cow's horns and tail; the other was a man with a pig's ears and snout. They were both naked except for cloth wrapped around the girl's hips and chest, and the man's hips.

"...We probably don't have to kill them," Yuichi said. "Just depowering them is enough. But they *were* trying to kill us, so I won't complain about the ones you killed." Even as he said that, he knew it sounded like he was making excuses.

"I see," Natsuki said. "Then I won't complain about your way of doing things, either. Can I bring something to tie them up?"

“Yeah. There’s probably something in Mutsuko’s luggage.”

As Natsuki made a beeline to the bags piled on the ground, Yuichi found himself watching her walk away. Usually he would have noticed the preliminary signs of attack and never be distracted like that. But Yuichi was completely off his guard.

The pig-man suddenly sprang up.

He must have been waiting for his chance, because he turned to his beast form in an instant, and kicked out with a hoof.

Yuichi’s response came too late. Even though he knew that the attack was coming, his body wouldn’t respond quickly enough.

He just stood up, preparing to take the attack and counter it.

But the hit never landed.

Blood shot from the pig-man’s forehead.

Yuichi turned around. Natsuki stood there, arm outstretched in a throwing stance. She had thrown one of the weights Yuichi had been wearing before.

“Look alive, would you?” Natsuki called. She searched through Mutsuko’s bag and produced a rope.

“Yeah, no excuse for that one,” Yuichi agreed.

“I could so *easily* kill you right now, Sakaki,” Natsuki murmured. She exuded malice.

Or rather, Yuichi could detect the faintest movements of her muscles, the kind that would presage a killing strike, and he interpreted that as malice. In that moment, Natsuki really was thinking about killing him.

“...But I won’t,” she concluded. “Knowing you, you probably have something up your sleeve.”

But it was only for a moment. She quickly dismissed it, and the malice around her dispersed.

“I don’t have anything up my sleeve in this condition...” Yuichi muttered self-reproachingly.

Natsuki didn’t respond as she began tying up the cow anthromorph with the rope.

Yuichi recognized that rope. It was made from braided artificial spider silk, the strongest textile in the modern era. Anthromorphs were likely stronger than humans, but there was no way they could break through that.

“We should hide for a while,” he said. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah. We need to recoup.”

Natsuki threw the dead anthromorphs into the sea, but the

bloodstains around the area made it clear that there had been a battle, and taking any more time to try to cover that up would likely be pointless.

After disposing of the bodies, Natsuki broke the lock of a small warehouse on the harbor and opened the shutters. She dragged the cow anthromorph in and left her.

Yuichi thought about helping, but Natsuki finished everything in the time it took him just to limp over.

They entered the warehouse and closed the shutter. They didn't intend to stay long, so they'd decided the minimal cover-up would do well enough.

Yuichi collapsed on the floor, while Natsuki rested her back against the wall. The anthromorph cow was on the floor, as well.

"So, what do we do next?" he asked Natsuki once everything seemed stable.

She said nothing.

"First, food," Yuichi decided. "I need to eat to recover. Meat. I need to eat meat."

"...You mean you want to eat me?" Natsuki asked, her face slightly red.

"I don't have time to play along with your jokes right now. Come on, beef or something."

"No! Don't eat me! No matter how delicious I might be..."

The sudden cry caused Yuichi to look over at the source of the voice. The cow-girl had awakened.

"I wasn't planning to eat you!" he shouted.

"Don't worry," Natsuki assured her. "Sakaki means it in a sexual sense. That's the reason he let you live. If he'd wanted to use you as provisions, he would have killed you, wouldn't he?"

"S-Sexual? Is that the reason you didn't kill me?!" The cow-girl gulped.

"Seriously, enough with the jokes already," Yuichi muttered. "I'm not up to playing along with them right now."

"Boring," Natsuki complained.

Yuichi felt anxious; Natsuki was clearly picking up some habits from Mutsuko.

Regathering his calm, Yuichi turned to talk to the cow-girl once more.

"Hey, I have a few questions. Could you answer them?"

"What will you do to me if I don't?" The cow-girl wriggled,

trying to maintain her distance. It seemed she was still under a misapprehension about the situation.

"If you don't want to answer, I won't make you," Yuichi said. "I won't try to force you to talk. But I will have to leave you where you are, unfortunately. If you answer my questions, I'll take off the rope."

After a moment's thought, the girl acquiesced. "...Okay."

"Okay. First, why did you attack us?"

"The island is preparing for the festival," the girl said. "We're supposed to attack outsiders on sight. We ended up on patrol around the island when we suddenly found you."

"On sight? Isn't that a little reckless?" Yuichi asked.

"Not really. The island's residents are all people like us. Outsiders aren't welcome."

"What did you mean when you said you 'ended up' on patrol?" he asked.

"It's our first time being assigned this job. I never expected anything like this to happen."

"Are there any other patrols?"

"Yeah. Quite a few, I think."

"Do you know of anyone who's come to this island besides us?" Yuichi asked.

"No. We only just came out here ourselves."

"What happens when a patrol finds someone?"

"We're supposed to kill them," the anthromorph said. "Unless they're virgins, in which case we're supposed to bring them to the Kukurizaka house. But most of us can't tell one from the other, you know? The unicorn guy's a special case, see..."

"What's Kukurizaka?" Yuichi cut in. If he let her go off on a rant about the guy she didn't like, it might take a while.

"The family that runs the island," the cow anthromorph said. "Their house is on the mountain at the center of the island. About halfway up, I think."

"What happens after you take them there?" he demanded. That was what worried him. The others could be in a really bad situation right now.

"They'll be sacrificed, I hear," the girl said. "They're going to be tributes to The Head of All, but they'll probably be safe until then... you asked before, but did anyone else come here?"

"Yeah, some friends and family," Yuichi said. "Now, my final

question. Do you know where I can find some food? Not instant stuff. I mean real meat and vegetables."

"Food? There should be fields in the area. There's kind of a small supermarket a little ways away from here. Is that enough?"

"Yeah, that's a big help." As promised, Yuichi untied the girl. "Okay, we're going. If we meet again, it's going to result in a fight, so I'd appreciate it if you'd stay away. You don't want to die, right?"

Yuichi couldn't imagine killing her, actually, but any fight could end in death. He carried that thought with him every day.

He stood up, but got a head rush and stumbled. His exhaustion really was severe.

"Wait!" As they were about to leave the warehouse, the cowgirl called after them.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Hey, you want something to eat, right? Why not come to my house?" she offered.

Chapter 6: Yuichi Sakaki Eats a Lot

Takashi Jonouchi was walking around the Kukurizaka mansion.

There wasn't much light. It was hard to see anything like this. But the faint light was enough for the people who lived in the mansion. Takashi understood that now.

Perhaps it was the awakening of his anthromorph nature, but he could see clearly even in the dark. All of his senses had become sharper, as well. Perhaps there were breeds of anthromorph that couldn't see as well in the dark, but they probably had methods of their own to get around.

With every step he took, Yuri Konishi walking beside him, the corridor let out a sound like a scream. Before long, they arrived at the island chief's room.

The Kukurizaka family were the rulers of Kurokami Island. In other words, the man who controlled the entirety of this isolated nation was in this room.

"I'm not particular. Just come in and sit down," a voice said from deeper within as Takashi dithered about how to comport himself within.

Takashi did as he was told, moving further in to sit down. His companion did the same.

He thought he should sit in formal kneeling position, but Yuri was sitting at ease beside him, so Takashi shifted to a cross-legged posture.

"It worked, eh?" the wrinkly old man asked, addressing them. "It seems there's a real difference between those with omens and those without."

Dogen Kukurizaka, the island's master, was a little old man in traditional Japanese dress.

Don't offend him. That was what Takashi had been told, but who would dream about joking around in the presence of someone like this? Takashi felt a sense of ambition about the man that belied his old age. He felt like he'd been thrown naked in front of some kind of savage predator.

If this was a village of anthromorphs, then surely, this man had the power of some dangerous animal inside of him.

"Thank you for your assistance today," Yuri said to Dogen.

The old man nodded placidly. "I believe you know, but I need you to stay here until tomorrow's full moon. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, that should not be a problem," Yuri agreed. "But I am curious about the people I captured..."

"You said you wanted them dead, right? Tomorrow, they'll be sacrificed to The Head of All. Is that acceptable? I would like as many sacrifices as possible. It's the fulfillment of a centuries-old wish, so I want it to be done in grand style."

"Yes. I don't mind that, as long as you definitely finish them." Yuri really wanted Aiko dead as soon as possible, but she couldn't do it herself as long as her deal with Kukurizaka was still on. She had earned permission to use the bestialization modifier vats in exchange for finding sacrifices for him.

"Is it a sign of society's moral decay?" the old man mused. "Truly sad. I didn't think it would be so hard to find virgin girls for sacrifice..."

Just finding virgins alone wouldn't necessarily have been so hard, but Kukurizaka had put specific conditions on age and beauty. Even so, Yuri hadn't done much in the way of looking for sacrifices. She'd just known that Aiko and the others were coming, so she'd caught them when they arrived.

"You'll be participating in the festival, too," Dogen told her. "Your role won't be anything difficult. Just be there, that's all."

"I'll be honored to be present for the revival of The Head of All!" Yuri spoke up with her usual spirited voice, as if she really felt that way.

Takashi felt a sudden sense of unease. This man, Dogen, was not to be trusted.

That was what Takashi's instincts were telling him.

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The cow-girl led Yuichi and Natsuki to her house.

It was a row house about ten minutes' walk from the harbor, consisting of three single-floor households linked together. It looked rather rundown on the outside; perhaps the sea wind had taken its toll.

The girl led them to the house on the right. It was a long, narrow house, but not very large on the whole.

The first room they passed was the kitchen, beyond which lay two rooms lined up vertically and partitioned by a sliding door. The toilet and bath facilities were in the very back.

The group sat down at a low table in the middlemost room.

"Okay, just relax," the girl said while she prepared a drink in the kitchen.

She was now fully human, and wearing Yoriko's clothing. For some reason, she had been nearly naked before, and so she had borrowed a few things from Yoriko's luggage. They were a little too small to fully contain her proportions, though.

"What made you do this? Miss... um, Cowgirl?" Yuichi asked.

"Hey, are you making fun of me? Call me Rion, Rion Takamichi."

"So, why are you doing this?" Yuichi asked. "You're basically betraying your own people, right?

"Well, I suppose. They might kill me if they find out, but I'm only alive until tomorrow either way, so I figured, whatever." Rion said all this in a completely matter-of-fact way as she brought in glasses of cold barley tea.

Yuichi drank his down in one gulp.

"Besides, I've kind of got it bad for strong men," she said. "It's instinct. The animal inside me, I guess. I feel like I need to obey strong guys." She cast a fleeting glance at Yuichi.

"What's happening tomorrow?" Natsuki asked as she took a sip of her tea.

"The festival," Rion said. "It's the biggest since the island's founding. The people who run this island are crazy, see, so they're talking about human sacrifices and stuff. All the young people on the island, including us, will be sacrificed, and we're making up what we lack by kidnapping outsiders."

"I guess that explains the betrayal, but don't you care that we killed those guys?" Yuichi asked. He himself had no regrets about what they'd done, but there was something awkward about talking to the last surviving member of the group.

"It's not like we really knew each other," Rion said. "The group only formed yesterday, and I guess when they die looking like monsters, it doesn't feel fully real."

"What the heck is with this island?" Yuichi muttered. "Ever

since we got here, it's been one crazy thing after another..."

"I'll explain the whole thing," Rion said. "Ah, but do you mind if I do it while we're cooking?" Rion brought a hot plate from the kitchen and set it up on top of the table. "First, the people who live on this island are the ones who... hey, what are your names, anyway?"

"I'm Yuichi Sakaki. And this is..."

"Natsuki Takeuchi."

"We came to the island as a training camp for our club," Yuichi finished.

"I see. Yuichi and Natsuki. Well, as you saw before, this island is full of monsters, myself included." Rion brought large quantities of beef out of the refrigerator. She turned on the hot plate and began frying it up.

"Cannibalism?" Natsuki asked as she watched the smoke rise up from the beef.

"Hey, now... it's not like I'm a real cow," Rion protested. "Anyway, moving on. Monsters have always lived on this island, but we just live like normal humans do. I went to school like any normal kid, and starting with middle school I left the island... since we only have an elementary school here. Well, I was hoping that I'd be able to leave the island behind and live like a normal person, but after I got into high school, I was called back to the island during summer break."

"What about your parents?" Yuichi asked.

"They stayed on the island. I was living in a dorm. Well, I said I was a monster, but I wasn't much of one. I could grow cow horns — that was about it. Same for the other ones. The snake guy got scales, the elephant guy could grow his nose longer, that kind of stuff."

"Is that why your chest is so large?" Natsuki asked flippantly.

"Shut up! You know how much it sucked during school, being called 'Holstein' and stuff? Well, I guess it is connected... like, the horse guy had a horse-face even when he was in human form."

"Was he like a horse down there, too?" Natsuki asked interestedly.

"How would I know?!" Rion barked back, her face crimson.

"Takeuchi... we're not getting anywhere. Please stop interjecting," Yuichi said. Natsuki's jokes were just impenetrable.

"Anyway," Rion snapped, "we were called back to the island,

taken to the basement of the Kukurizaka house, and locked up in these tank-like things, which filled with water. I thought I was going to drown, but for some reason, I could breathe inside. But it was driving me crazy, not knowing what was going on! Then, just as I was totally about to lose it, the water drained out. The next thing I knew, I had gained the ability to turn into a cow monster. Oh, and eat up!" Rion had prepared plates and sauces.

Yuichi began eating it without hesitation. He was too hungry to feel any sense of caution about the food.

"Then we were taken to meet the island head, Kukurizaka, and he told us we were going to be sacrifices to The Head of All," Rion continued. "He said we should consider it an honor. Then he put me in a group with others like me, and asked us to keep an eye on the island. He said it was training in using our full beast forms. I hadn't wanted to be turned into that thing, but it was like he didn't even seem to consider that anyone would try to defy him or run away. After all, running away wouldn't change anything, so what would it matter? I guess that's what I thought... and that's when you showed up."

Yuichi was going through the meat with truly terrifying speed. Undaunted, Natsuki began packing it away, as well. Rion brought more from the fridge.

"By the way, why is there so much beef in your house?" Yuichi asked.

"Don't tell me. The reason your parents aren't here is..." Natsuki's proposed.

Chilled by the thought, Yuichi stopped eating.

"What the hell?!" Rion exploded. "My parents are at Kukurizaka's house, that's all! I don't know what they're doing there... But anyway, the beef is kind of a last supper type of thing. We wanted to eat the most delicious stuff we could for our final meal..."

Rion sounded a bit solemn as she said it, but Yuichi resumed eating again, with gusto.

"Well, setting that aside, the reason I'm giving you this feast is because I was hoping you might save me," Rion continued. "What do you think?"

"Sure thing."

"Ah, I mean, I doubt you'd be willing to help me escape this bizarre island just in exchange for some food, but... what?" Rion

looked at Yuichi, dumbstruck. She must not have really expected him to agree to it. “You’re sure?”

“You did feed me, after all,” Yuichi said. “If you hadn’t, I’d probably be pretty helpless right now. You helped me out. In my house, we have a rule that you always repay a good meal... well, that’s what my sister says, anyway.”

Yuichi kept on eating. The food he ate wouldn’t be digested and turned to nutrients right away, but the more he ate, the more he felt his strength coming back to him.

“R-Right! Keep eating, then! There’s still plenty left!” Rion cheerfully brought him more beef.

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“*Byouin-zaka no Kubi-kukuri no Ie,*” Mutsuko declared. It was the title of a book, also known as *The House of Hanging,* by Seishi Yokomizo.

“E...” Aiko considered, thinking over the last syllable of the phrase Mutsuko had used. “E... Emulsion! Ah...”

In declaring a word that ended with an N, Aiko had lost the game. They were playing Word Chain, Genre Version. Someone declared a word or phrase, and the next person had to state one of their own, starting with the last player’s last syllable. The twist was that they could only use words within their assigned genres. Mutsuko’s genre had been mystery novels, while Aiko had cooking, and Yoriko had fashion.

“Noro... if you’d give a little more thought to these things, you’d remember when a word ends in N before you say it,” Yoriko said, exasperated.

“Yeah... the minute something comes to mind, I just want to blurt it out...” Aiko responded, self-consciously.

Incidentally, an emulsion referred to a fusion of two liquids — such as water and oil — that normally didn’t mix. It was used to make recipes like *spaghetti aglio e olio.*

“Ah, but there’s nothing to do. I wonder when Yu is gonna come save us!” Mutsuko groaned, flopping back on the tatami mats.

Aiko was more or less keeping her calm by now, but she still couldn’t understand how Mutsuko could act so at home in a situation like this.

“Um... are you *sure* he’s coming?” she asked.

“Noro! Are you suggesting my brother would just abandon us?” Yoriko asked indignantly.

“Of course not! But what if he just doesn’t make it in time? They said that ritual thing is tonight.” A night had passed since their initial capture.

Anything they could use to tell time had been confiscated, so Aiko didn’t know exactly when it was, but she knew that some time had passed since breakfast. It was probably around noon by now.

“Y’know, I’ve always wondered what it would be like to be a captured princess, but it’s actually pretty boring,” Mutsuko complained. “There’s just nothing to do! Hey, Noro, was it like this for you when you were captured by Takeuchi?”

“What, me? I didn’t really have time to feel bored... I woke up and I talked with Takeuchi a bit, and then Sakaki came right away...”

Aiko had believed that Yuichi would come to save her then, but it had still been deeply moving when he actually did it. She could see why Mutsuko had such high hopes.

“...Hmm, there’s a chance that Yu might not make it in time if we just wait,” Mutsuko declared. “So if we want to escape, we should probably do it now, huh? There’s only one guard, after all.”

“Excuse me! I can hear you!” the guard shouted.

There was only one guard, but he was definitely paying attention. The guards took regular shifts, so there seemed to be no chance of him getting tired and falling asleep. He had overheard Mutsuko’s rebellious comments, which would probably put him even more on the alert.

“So what? You can’t stop us!” Mutsuko declared. “Now, to escape... I wonder how much fighting it would require, at minimum? That guy’s a definite, but if we keep it to bare minimums after that... plus, Noro probably can’t fight...” Mutsuko began rambling under her breath.

Fight.

Aiko probably wouldn’t be of any use in a fight. Mutsuko knew that, and so was eliminating her from the pool of potential fighters.

But... if I used that...

The transformation.

Aiko still didn’t know what had really happened back then. She remembered the events, but they felt like a dream, like she had been on the outside looking in. Even so, she had used that state to

briefly beat back her rampaging brother, so it was probably a combat-capable form.

She'd probably need to drink some blood to transform. But she wasn't sure if she could control it.

"Noro?" Yoriko asked, looking at her in concern.

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking..."

"We've decided how to approach this," Yoriko said.

"What's the plan?" Aiko asked.

"We're going to escape from here and meet up with my brother," the girl explained, as if it were nothing.

"Huh? I'm all for that, but how do we get out?"

"We'll decide it with rock paper scissors!" Mutsuko thrust out her fist.

"Huh? Decide what?" Aiko had no idea what the two sisters were plotting.

"Who fights first!" Mutsuko explained. "Because we can't fight for long stretches like Yu does."

"Don't bother, Big Sis. I'll go first," Yoriko said. "It's best if you're the one who stays mobile to the end, right?"

"That's a fair point... but are you sure, Yori?"

"If I end up immobilized, I'll be counting on you, Noro," Yoriko said, to Aiko's complete bafflement.

"Um, sure, okay..." Aiko responded, despite still being extremely confused.

"I'd like to escape and take him out in one shot. You think I can do it?" Yoriko asked.

"It's about time for lunch, right? Probably so, then," Mutsuko said.

Aiko said nothing; Mutsuko and Yoriko seemed to know what they were doing.

It must be lunchtime now, because the guard was walking up to the prison with trays of food. He began to pass the trays through the space beneath the bars.

Yoriko casually approached the man.

"Hey, mister..." Yoriko said to him, a seductive tone in her voice.

The man hadn't let down his guard. The minute she approached the bars, he knew he was in danger.

But what he didn't know was how much of a threat Yoriko

really was. Had he known, he would never have let himself get that close.

“Furukami,” Yoriko whispered.

She planted her foot, dropped her hips, focused her strength on a single point, and launched a hand straight forward.

Her palm burst through the bars and kept on going, straight into the man’s face.

It was enough to send him flying. He hit the wall with a violent crash, and then lay still.

“Um?” Aiko watched the scene unfold in a daze.

Even though the bars were only made of wood, Yoriko’s palm strike had still been enough to smash them and send the man outside them flying.

“Hey! But that... that was...” Aiko stammered.

It was a technique that Yuichi had used. A technique to focus one's power to temporarily exceed human limits.

"Sis... I can't move my right arm anymore," Yoriko complained.

"Let me see." Mutsuko checked Yoriko's right arm. "Yori, you're so lucky! It doesn't look like a break. But yeah, I guess you won't be able to use it for a while. Between you and me together, I bet we have about three fights left. Since we can't do much if we immobilize our legs."

Aiko shuddered as she realized the meaning of this exchange. "U-Um, does that mean..."

"Yeah. Unlike Yu, we have our limits," Mutsuko said. "The tragedy of being born a woman! We just don't have the same physical endurance."

Mutsuko looked over at Manaka and Akemi, who were staring, dumbstruck over what they'd just seen.

"If we get out, we'll come to save you later, so do you want to stay here?" Mutsuko asked. "You can come with us if you want, but we can't promise to look after you."

"Oh, um, yes. The first thing, please..." Akemi nodded quickly.

"Okay, let's hurry! Stay close, okay?" Mutsuko ordered.

Aiko and the Sakaki sisters left the prison behind, and began running to escape the mansion.

*****

Yuichi woke up a little after noon.

After dinner, Yuichi and Natsuki's exhaustion caught up with them, and they fell fast asleep.

"Boy, you eat a lot, and you sleep a lot. It's kinda impressive," said Rion. "I made lunch. You want some?"

Rion had awakened before them and prepared lunch. Natsuki, who had been sleeping beside Yuichi, also woke up, and rubbed at her eyes.

"Yeah. Thanks. Food would be good," Yuichi said.

Natsuki, for her part, just nodded wordlessly. Maybe she wasn't a morning person.

It seemed there was still some beef left, which Rion had thrown together with some vegetables for an impromptu stir-fry.

“Hey, I know I asked you to save me and all, but do you know how that’s going to go down?” Rion asked. She didn’t seem to have a concrete idea of her own for how she wanted to be saved.

“We’ll just have to find a way off of this island,” Yuichi said. “Once we’re back in civilization, my sister can handle the rest.”

“Don’t you think you’re being rather irresponsible, Sakaki?” Natsuki commented. “You did the same thing when you fought me: never thinking more than one step ahead.”

“Uh…”

Natsuki’s observation struck Yuichi into silence. She was right. Anything he didn’t want to be bothered with, he always left to his sister.

But in order to leave things to his sister, first, he would need to save her.

“You mentioned Kukurizaka’s mansion, right?” Yuichi asked. “That should be our first stop. If they’ve been captured, they’ll be there. If they’re not there, they’ve probably escaped.”

“Kukurizaka’s mansion is right up the mountain,” Rion said. “But it’s pretty big, and there’s gonna be heavy security there just before the festival. I doubt it’ll be all that easy to just get inside and search it.”

“Where *are* they holding the festival? It’s not at the mansion, right?” Yuichi asked.

She had said the girls were going to be sacrificed, which meant that Mutsuko and the others would likely be brought alive to the festival location.

“The festival site,” said Rion. “But you can only get to them from the mansion…”

Rion thought for a minute, then seemed to remember something. She walked into the back room, and returned with an old sheet of paper.

“This is a map of the island. The festival site is here.”

The picture depicted the nearly circular island, broadly divided into upper and lower areas. They were currently in the lower area, the side commonly known as the “front.”

The festival site was on the back side, on the diametric opposite side of the mountain from Kukurizaka’s mansion.

“I’ve only ever gone there through the mansion, but if it’s the way it looks on this map, maybe you can get to it from the back,” Rion said. “But the back side is off limits to visitors, so I’ve never

been there. I don't know much about it."

"The back side, huh?" Yuichi pondered. "If security's as strict as you say, then it seems like it would be dangerous to go there from the mansion, so..."

Yuichi wanted to make it there as inconspicuously as possible.

"Security, eh?" Natsuki asked. "What exactly are they protecting it from? I can't imagine the island gets many visitors."

Yuichi was wondering the same thing as Natsuki. To get to the island, you'd need to charter your own boat. You couldn't exactly get there on a whim.

"Oh, it's like... There's been rumors going around on the internet, see? About this secret festival we hold that people can't talk about," Rion explained. "It's more than just rumors, too. Somehow, it got out that the festival is tomorrow. I mean, it's not like there are all that many ways to get to the island anyway, but it's the long-awaited festival of The Head of All's revival and stuff. It's, like, the moment the villagers have been waiting for ages, so if it fails, they're nothing. The island might as well not exist anymore."

"By the way, you keep mentioning 'The Head of All.' What is that, exactly?" Yuichi asked.

"They say it's a god, that it fell from the sky long ago, and it was just a head, like the name suggests. They say it gave the people of the island the power to change into animals, and ever since, all the kids on the island have been born with that power. The 'revival' thing is about the head wanting a body again. We exist to give it that body. Once a year, a lot of people are offered as sacrifices. The Head of All absorbs them to recover its body."

"So, does it really exist?" Yuichi asked. To him, a god was an invisible figure in the sky, looking down on the people and protecting them from on high. But Rion was clearly talking about something far more tangible.

"Yeah, and everyone believes it's a god," Rion said. "I don't buy into it myself, but they say this whole world is all a dream by The Head of All. They say this is his dreaming time."

"Dreaming time, huh? That reminds me of an Aboriginal legend. In ancient days, when half-man, half-beasts roamed the world, the people would go there when they slept." Yuichi thought back to Tomomi's words. She had mentioned, in the talk about worldviews, something about a faction that believed the world was

just someone else's dream.

"Wow... you know a lot about stuff like that, huh, Yuichi?" Rion said in admiration.

"I don't know a lot about it," he said. "I'm just remembering things my sister told me. Anyway, I doubt Australian legends have anything to do with this island. So what kind of guy is this 'Head of All'?"

"I've only ever seen it through a screen," Rion said. "It's pretty big... well, whenever I look at it, I feel so scared, I can barely move. Same goes for most people. Anyway, the people who live here have been doing this for a long time. And it seems it's finally almost time for The Head of All's body to fully recover."

"What will The Head of All do once it's fully recovered, or revived, or whatever?"

"They say it'll destroy humanity, and create a planet where anthromorphs rule."

"That's a pretty big deal." It was hard for Yuichi to know how seriously he should take all of this. But god or not, it was worth committing it all to memory. "Anyway, let's go to the festival site and see what's there. Takamichi, could you stay here? We'll come get you later."

"Do you have a cell phone?" Rion asked.

"Huh? You mean this island gets reception? I don't, though. It was in the ocean for so long..." He had realized his phone was broken when he changed clothes, so he'd just left it there.

"Got it," she said. "I'll wait here. But you'd better come for me, okay?"

"What about your parents, by the way?" he asked.

"...I doubt they'll go along. They're really all-in on the island's way of doing things. I doubt they'd ever be willing to live anywhere else."

"Got it," Yuichi said. "Everyone's got their circumstances. But I promise I'll come back for you."

"Ah, wait. Take this, if you like." As they were about to leave, Rion called out.

She gave him the map from before, as well as a ring of keys.

"What's this?" Yuichi asked.

"The key to a mini-truck," she said. "It might come in handy."

Yuichi had no experience driving cars. He looked over at Natsuki.

“I can drive.”

Yuichi took the gifts gratefully, and despite a deep sense of foreboding about it, he allowed Natsuki to handle the driving.

*****

Mutsuko strode forward purposefully through the large mansion. Aiko and Yoriko followed behind her.

Fortunately, it seemed rather deserted despite its large size, because they didn’t run into anyone. That also meant they had avoided any more fights.

“Um, do you know the way out?” Aiko asked.

“Oh, don’t worry! I remember it all, easy as pie! I could see it, after all,” Mutsuko said with perfect confidence. “I can see even through a blindfold! I have perfect direction, even in a car!”

“To catch you up, my big sister runs a lot of ‘what if I were kidnapped?’ simulations,” Yoriko explained. “Would you like to learn how to do it, too? You seem to have a very ‘kidnap me’ sort of face.”

“A *what* sort of face?!” Aiko fired back at Yoriko’s mocking words.

She glared at Yoriko for a moment. But as she noticed the way Yoriko’s right arm dangled uselessly at her side, the glare turned into a look of concern.

“Yoriko, is your arm okay?”

“Yeah. It’s nothing much. What, are you worried about me?”

“More like... concerned,” Aiko said.

“I’m fine. I injured my right hand, and I’m right-handed. That means I’ll have a hard time eating.”

“But isn’t that...” Aiko had a hard time seeing how that was “fine.”

“Yes. That means I get to make my brother feed me! I’m sure he’d indulge me if he knew I’d wrecked my good hand! ‘Say ah, say ah,’ he’d say! He might even be willing to do mouth-to-mouth feeding! Ah, I don’t suppose I’ll end up so bad off that it would require mouth-to-mouth feeding, do you?”

“What?” It took Aiko a few seconds to understand exactly what Yoriko was talking about. “Wait, are you saying you used your right hand because...”

The thought that she had immobilized her good hand, on

purpose, for something like that... it gave Aiko a new respect for Yoriko's sheer nerve.

"This will also make it hard to get dressed! I'll need my brother to help me with that, too," Yoriko declared. "'Oh, what a bother! I just can't do it! Whenever I try to dress myself, the pain just gets so bad'... and then I can make him hold me, and guide his hands, and collapse on him, and lie on top of him, and he can't shake me off! Because I'm injured! He can't say no to his dear sister's requests at a time like this!" Yoriko's eyes glimmered like never before at the thought of having the foolproof excuse.

Aiko narrowed her eyes at her.

"Of course, it doesn't actually hurt very much," Yoriko said. "I'm using the effect of furukami to dull the pain. Once you're as good as my brother is, you can completely sever all sensation."

Perhaps realizing she had gone too far, or just feeling awkward about having Aiko stare at her, Yoriko walked the subject back.

"Even so..." Aiko said. Yoriko couldn't move her arm below the shoulder, and painful-looking purple welts were visible on the exposed flesh. It was hard to believe it didn't hurt, as she'd claimed.

"Oh, remember the 'pain, pain, fly away' chant? That really works," Aiko said. "Did you know that?"

"Really? I always thought it was a placebo effect," Yoriko said.

"That's part of it, but poking the part that hurts also lets you reroute the pain signals. It's called Gate Control Theory. The words have an effect, too. The way a person thinks about pain can make it feel better or worse. So if you tell them that the pain has gone away, it actually sort of does."

"Hey! Noro, are you interested in Gate Control, too?" Mutsuko interrupted, bubbling with curiosity.

"Huh? No, I'm not actually—"

"Gate control theory! The 'gate' refers to the substantia gelatinosa cells of the dorsolateral fasciculus near the entrance to the spinal cord! Pain travels through that to reach the brain! Thin nerves called the A-delta fiber and the C fiber carry the pain through the gate! A-delta fibers handle short pain, while C fibers handle lingering pain! But the momentary pressure stimulation used in 'pain, pain, fly away' increases the signals traveling through the thick A-beta fibers, which send pressure information! The gate *can* allow information from multiple fibers through at once, but since the A-beta fiber is thicker, overloading it can overwhelm the gate

and keep the thin fibers' information from getting through! That in turn keeps pain signals from reaching—"

Aiko stopped listening halfway through.

Mutsuko seemed to have an impressive memory, though, and they arrived at the mansion's entrance without a single wrong turn. The shoes they had taken off were still there, so Aiko put hers back on.

Aiko was on her guard, but as she looked around, she didn't see anyone in sight.

"There were two guards here when we got in, but I don't see them now! Thank goodness!" Overjoyed, Aiko and the others flew out the door.

Aiko didn't learn this until later, but preparations for the ritual were complete, so the two guards were already on their way to the festival site. The island patrols were on their way there, as well.

Four groups of six guards each. In other words, twenty-four anthromorphs on their way to the festival site had just returned to Kukurizaka's mansion.

This meant that the moment they flew out of the mansion's front door, they were greeted by a mass of anthromorphs, all glaring at them with cold eyes.

Chapter 7: Aiko's Dog is Here

"We... can get out of this, can't we?" Aiko looked imploringly to Mutsuko as she felt the sweat dripping down from her forehead.

"Hmm, I dunno... This is pretty..." Apparently not even Mutsuko could come up with a plan to get out of a situation like this.

Aiko looked around.

There were anthromorphs everywhere — too many to count at a glance. There were probably at least twenty.

They were barely outside the Kukurizaka mansion.

Aiko was about to suggest going back inside, but just then, they heard footsteps from behind. Apparently someone had realized they had escaped, and their pursuers had finally caught up with them.

"I guess there's no fighting our way out of this one," Yoriko said defeatedly.

"Um, what if we just let them catch us again? They did take pretty good care of us..." Aiko proposed, but knew that it wasn't a realistic suggestion. They had taken advantage of that "good care" to get out once already, which meant that their captors would probably increase security next time, robbing them of a future chance to escape.

"Hey, Noro! You think Yu might just happen to come along and save us at exactly this minute?" Mutsuko asked.

"H-Hey, yeah! This is right around the time Sakaki always shows up! I'm apparently the love interest, after all!"

"Even ignoring that love interest nonsense, my brother would never fail to save his darling little sister!"

The three called out in unison:

"Yu!"

"Sakaki!"

"Big Brother!"

Their cries echoed off the mountain.

Aiko could feel the anthromorphs' gazes grow one level colder.

"Hey! Why isn't Yu here? This is gonna be hard to overlook!

You'll be punished for this later! With Yugo-style torture!" Mutsuko declared.

"Sis, if we don't do something, there won't be a later!" Yoriko wailed.

The anthromorphs had surrounded them.

"Who are these people?" one of them wondered.

"Oh, I know. We captured them yesterday, the group I was part of."

"So they escaped, huh? Was their guard asleep on the job?"

"Well, it's perfect timing, right? We're going to the festival site either way, so let's just take them with us."

They didn't seem to want to kill them right away, it seemed; they must be too valuable as sacrifices.

What do I do?! Aiko was uncertain.

Should she unleash her vampiric powers? Or should she let herself be caught and wait for rescue?

She could suck Mutsuko or Yoriko's blood and become a vampire, perhaps... but could she really handle so many enemies? She didn't know, but she had to try. It was all Aiko could think of. And if she couldn't beat them all, or they couldn't get away, then at least she would be the only casualty; Mutsuko and Yoriko would still have value as sacrifices.

Aiko walked over to Mutsuko and whispered to her softly, "Um, Mutsuko... could I suck your blood?"

"Oh! So that's your plan. No problem! But are you sure?" Mutsuko asked.

Mutsuko gave ready consent with no hesitation whatsoever.

Aiko got around behind Mutsuko, who crouched down. Aiko softly put her lips to her neck...

She was just about to concentrate on extending her fangs, when suddenly, it happened. What looked like the heads of a dog, a weasel, and a bear flew through the air.

"Huh?"

Just as Aiko looked up to confirm she hadn't imagined it, they were joined by the heads of a cat and a pig. Heads were flying left and right as if in a joyous rhythm.

Aiko watched, dumbstruck. The next thing she knew, all the anthromorphs around her had fallen over. Not one of them still had a head.

"Sakaki? No... it's not, is it?" she asked. No matter how

superhuman Yuichi was, he couldn't possibly do all this.

Aiko looked around her. There was an anthromorph standing there.

It was a wolf-man. His facial features had a masculine cast to them, and he was about two meters tall, strapping and burly.

It was immediately clear that he wasn't one of their captors; he was the one who had killed them. He had a presence about him that was lacking in the anthromorphs they had met on this island so far.

The wolf-man walked over to Aiko and went down on his knees. He bowed so low that his nose touched the ground — though he still appeared very large to the petite Aiko.

"U-Um..." Aiko stammered in confusion.

"Noro! I bet you're supposed to say 'rise'! He seems like that kind of guy!" Mutsuko declared.

Certainly, it did seem like he might stay that way if she didn't say something.

"I'm sorry. Could you rise, please?" Aiko asked.

The wolf-man did as he was told, raising his eyes to look up at her. He was truly a beautiful wolf.

"What would you call that, a WILF?" Yoriko murmured as she eyed the werewolf.

"Um, thank you. You did save us, right?" Aiko asked hesitantly.

"I am unworthy of your words..."

Aiko drew back in surprise. The wolf was crying.

"Um... could you please act normal?" she asked. It was hard to know what was normal for him, but Aiko had a hunch that the conversation wouldn't get very far with him carrying on like this.

"You saved us, right?" Aiko added.

"Indeed," the wolf-man said. "I saw that harm was about to strike my princess, and so I took their heads without hesitation."

"Princess? Um... yeah, okay, I guess I see where this is going. You mean me, right?" Aiko asked. She felt a little self-conscious about acknowledging that she was being addressed as a princess.

"Are you saying... you do not remember my unworthy self?!" The wolf pressed closer to her.

Aiko drew back. "No, I do not remember you. I have no idea who you are, and I'm afraid you might have the wrong person."

“Impossible! I would recognize the princess’s smell anywhere!”

“Smell?” Aiko only grew more embarrassed at the thought of having a distinctive smell.

“So, I’m not following everything here, but is it safe to assume you’re on our side?” Mutsuko asked the werewolf.

“Yes. If you stand with the princess, then I stand with you, as well.”

“If we stand here talking, someone else is probably going to come along sooner or later. Maybe we should get moving?” Mutsuko asked.

The werewolf looked at Aiko again, as if asking permission to stand.

Wait a minute... is he going to keep doing this?!

“U-Um... This woman is our club’s president. She’s higher ranked than I am. So if you could defer to her...” Aiko said.

“I understand. If Your Highness does not give me an order, and I see nothing wrong with it, I shall obey ‘Clubs President.’”

Aiko had her doubts that he really did understand.

*****

Yuichi and Natsuki went through the luggage at the harbor, took everything that might be useful, and loaded it onto the mini-truck. Then they checked the map, then headed out to the festival site. It was on the other side of the mountain from Kukurizaka’s mansion, so they went around the coastline from the harbor to the far side of the island.

This part of the island was usually off-limits, and there was even a fence partitioning it off. But Yuichi used his lock-picking skill, and they got through without issue.

Fortunately, Natsuki wasn’t as bad a driver as he had feared. It was just that she ignored all road signs, few of them as there were.

“Takeuchi, where did you learn how to drive?” Yuichi asked.

“I didn’t have to ‘learn.’ It isn’t that hard, you know.”

Once they were on the other side of the island, they could see the back side of the mountain. This side was a sheer cliff, with a few brown rocks jutting out here and there.

There was also something so unbelievable that Yuichi couldn’t

immediately believe his eyes.

"That's... a spaceship, right?"

"Is it? I've never seen a spaceship before, so I couldn't say," Natsuki said.

"I've never seen one either, but..." It seemed to Yuichi very much like there was a spaceship sticking out of the mountain's face.

It was a shining silver object with an aerodynamic shape, and it was jutting out from the cliffside about halfway up. Yuichi checked the map. The festival site label corresponded with the location of the "spaceship."

Once they reached the exact opposite side of the island from the harbor, they changed course to head for the mountain.

The roads here weren't paved, so the truck jostled and rattled as they drove along.

The closer they came, the more the thing sticking out of the mountain looked like a ship.

It was sticking out at just the right angle to have fallen from the sky and crashed there. Yuichi was growing more and more convinced that it was a spaceship.

"If they want to call it a festival site, okay, but..." he murmured.

"Why does it bother you? What does it matter what anyone calls it?" Natsuki asked.

"I guess it doesn't... but when I get home, I'm checking Google Maps."

Before long, the car arrived at the base of the cliff. They got out and examined the cliff face.

It was looking like a nearly vertical climb. It wasn't a very tall mountain — only about 400 meters to the peak — and the spaceship was stuck in about halfway up. In other words, about 200 meters.

"I thought there might be a road to the site or something, but..." He had never imagined the festival site would be a spaceship sticking out of a cliff.

Yuichi checked the map one more time. He was getting the feeling that the entrance to the ship must be inside the mountain.

"I bet the spaceship was here originally, and the mansion was built later to act as... like, a passage or a gateway to get to it," he said. But just knowing that wouldn't help them get inside.

"It would take too long to go back around. Should we climb it? That seems faster." Yuichi took out the spider silk rope he had

packed in the luggage and put it over his shoulders.

He looked up at the cliff, determined the shortest route, then jumped to get a grip on the rock face.

"What will you do, Takeuchi?" he asked. He tied the rope off, then looked back down to see if she was following.

She wasn't there.

"Trying to run off on your own?" Natsuki's voice said from right beside him.

She was supporting herself from a scalpel stuck into the rock face.

"You can use those like that?" Yuichi stared in shock as Natsuki continued using the scalpels to smoothly climb the rock face.

"Don't take too long, or I'll leave you behind," Natsuki said.

Yuichi quickly moved to follow her.

The rock face was sturdy, with plenty of handholds, allowing Yuichi to climb the whole 200 meters without much trouble.

From afar, the spaceship had looked smooth, but up close, it was quite weathered, with lots of places to grab on to. The two of them climbed around the outside of the spaceship to make it to the top.

"So, is there an entrance or anything here?" he asked.

They looked around on top of the spaceship. From this vantage point, they could see that it was really quite large. It was about 100 meters wide, and the visible part of the length, alone, was about 200 meters. But there was no entrance as far as they could see.

"Sakaki, what about that?" Natsuki pointed to his feet.

He looked, and realized that there were cracks in the chassis here and there.

Yuichi crouched next to one of the cracks, and Natsuki walked up beside him to look, as well. The walls and floor inside were all illuminated, making it easy to see what was there.

"Huh?" Yuichi gaped as he saw an unexpected sight.

Yuri Konishi was inside the ship, and she was furious.

The spaceship interior visible through the fissure was a round hall. It was about 50 meters in diameter, and 50 meters to the ceiling. No one was looking their way, but they could probably be seen if they weren't careful.

Across from the entrance to the room was something that looked like an altar. A golden-colored mass was curled on top of it.

Its label was “God.”

Yuichi wasn’t exactly sure which part of it was the head, but he had to assume it was the part under the label.

“...Wow. I finally get to see God...” he whispered in a dumbfounded voice.

If Soul Reader was to be trusted, this was the ritual site, and the golden mass was The Head of All.

Yuichi tried to estimate its size. Its exact silhouette was hard to ascertain due to the way it was curled up, but it seemed about the size of an African elephant. Six meters long, three meters tall.

The altar was surrounded with screens to keep it from being seen from eye level, and in front of the altar were a small group of people who seemed to be in the middle of an argument.

“What is the meaning of this?” one of them demanded. This was Yuri Konishi, wearing a flashy summer dress. Above her head hung the label “Anthromorph (Cat),” and she was clearly in a fury about something.

Behind her stood a boy dressed in a kimono. His label was “Anthromorph (Wolf),” and he looked vaguely familiar. Yuichi realized it was the boy who had tried to ask Natsuki out.

“I believe his name was Takashi Jonouchi,” Natsuki said. She had claimed to have forgotten it before, but it seemed she remembered it now. Maybe explaining things to Aiko had been too much of a bother at the time, or perhaps she just had wanted to act disinterested in front of Yuichi.

The target of Yuri Konishi’s ire was a small old man in Japanese-style clothing with the label “Anthromorph (Baboon).”

This must be Dogen Kukurizaka, the island’s chief.

Judging from his comportment and the fierce atmosphere around him, he was the strongest person in that room. According to Rion, the pecking order among anthromorphs was decided based on strength, which meant he must be the supreme authority on the island. That authority was further asserted by the group of men standing behind him.

“What do you mean?” Dogen asked Yuri, seeming unimpressed by her disrespectful attitude.

“Aiko Noro, the girl I captured! She’s escaped, hasn’t she?” Yuri snapped. “This wasn’t what you promised!”

“Ah, she escaped, yes. So I’d heard.”

She escaped? That was good news for Yuichi. It meant he

wouldn't have to rush in there half-cocked.

"You heard? How can you be so calm about this? You need her for your sacrifice, don't you?" Yuri snapped.

Yuichi wondered about that, too. Dogen seemed extremely calm; it was as if he didn't even care that his sacrifices were loose.

"Sacrifice?" he asked. "Ah, yes. It's true, the sacrifices are important."

"Is that all you have to say?!"

"Just because they've escaped the mansion doesn't mean they'll escape the island. We'll catch them sooner or later."

"I've had enough! I left the job to you, and you let her slip through your fingers! The minute you catch her, I'll finish her myself! Do you understand me?"

"Hmm. Unacceptable. We can't afford to lose any more sacrifices."

Yuri had turned around and prepared to go, but a group of men blocked her way.

"The virgin sacrifices are to be used after The Head of All's revival," Dogen said. "They add flavor to the festival of rebirth, but they're not necessary for it. To heal The Head's injury requires something else..."

"What are you talking—"

Dogen's subordinates surrounded Yuri.

"It requires anthromorph sacrifices," he said. "We have served The Head of All since ancient times, and while I'm ready and willing to offer myself up to him... it's human nature to want to use as many outsiders as possible, don't you think?"

The golden mass on the altar moved. It lifted its head and poked its face over the screen.

As Yuichi watched, he felt a shock run through him.

Its face was human.

The Head's tongue snapped out and wrapped it around Takashi. In an instant, Takashi was in the thing's mouth.

"Warrrrgh!" Takashi screamed as he was seized, and instantly transformed into a beast — a werewolf.

But the transformation was futile at this point. Takashi's body had already begun to fuse with the mouth area of The Head.

He wasn't swallowed down or chewed up — he was being absorbed directly into it. His body gradually grew smaller and more featureless.

Yuri watched it all, speechless. It wasn't until Takashi was over half absorbed that she snapped back to her right mind.

"You tricked us!" she screamed, and took her own beast form. This wasn't the half-beast form that Yuichi had seen before, but a true cat anthromorph, body covered in golden fur.

Was the transformation meant to flee, or to fight? Whichever it was, Yuri never had a chance to try it, as she was immediately pushed to the floor by anthromorphs who appeared behind her.

"You're a lucky one. It seems you'll be a sacrifice for after his revival." Dogen walked up to Yuri and smiled down at her.

"Lock her away until the appointed time," he commanded, and Yuri was dragged away.

The Head apparently had no interest in Yuri. Once it finished absorbing Takashi, it huddled back down, with an air of satisfaction. Then it turned its face up toward the ceiling.

It looked at Yuichi, and it smiled. Its enormous face contorted, smiling a smile broader than any human face ever could.

That was when Yuichi started thinking about ways to kill it.

*****

The werewolf led the way down the mountain, followed by Aiko, Yoriko, and Mutsuko. Fortunately, no one was following them at the moment, and they didn't run into any villagers on the way, either.

"My name is Aiko Noro. These are Yoriko and Mutsuko Sakaki," Aiko said, introducing him to the sisters. She had found the werewolf a little frightening at first, but she was gradually starting to get used to his presence.

"Lady Aikonoro... so that is your name?" The werewolf did speak their language fluently, but occasionally, his intonation was a bit off.

"What's your name?" Aiko asked.

"You truly do not remember, then..." The werewolf lowered his face sadly.

"I'm sorry. I really don't..." Aiko was certain she had no memory of the werewolf, but she still felt bad about how sad that made him.

"You need not apologize!" he declared. "It is natural to forget the name of a nothing such as I. Your Highness is not at fault!"

“But not knowing your name is going to get very inconvenient, so could you just tell it to us already?” Yoriko interrupted, annoyed by the stalled conversation.

“My name is Nero,” he said. “It is the name that Your Highness gave me.”

“Okay, Nero,” Mutsuko butted in. “What brought you here all of a sudden? You saved us, but we’re pretty much in the dark as to why!”

“I had been traveling the world searching for the princess, when the other day, abruptly, I sensed her power,” he explained.

“Ah! I bet that’s when Noro transformed!” Mutsuko cried.

“Transformed?” Yoriko tilted her head in confusion.

Aiko realized that Yoriko didn’t know much about what had happened the other day. She might not even have known that Aiko was a vampire.

“I-I’ll explain another time!” Aiko said, trying to deflect it. It was too much to go into right now.

“It was clear that the princess was in Japan,” the werewolf said, “and when I arrived there, I met a strange woman. She told me that I would find you here.”

“I wonder who that woman could be,” Mutsuko said. “Hardly anybody knew that we were scheduled to come to this island during our training camp... And why are you a princess, anyway, Noro?”

“Nero!” Aiko suddenly interrupted. “Um, I really have no clue as to why I’m your princess, and I don’t think I want to know, either. So um, could you just...”

Aiko felt anxious. She didn’t know what to do about being called a princess in some context she knew nothing about. No matter what this man said, she couldn’t believe it had anything to do with her.

“I understand,” the werewolf said. “Your Highness... Lady Aiko, you have your own life now, and I have no intention to threaten that. From this moment forth, I swear my loyalty and service to Lady Aikonoro.”

“You ‘swear your loyalty’?” Aiko was relieved that he seemed to understand that much, at least. She felt embarrassed about the oath of loyalty, but she had a feeling that arguing about it wouldn’t do any good, so she decided to leave it alone.

“Well, if that’s all settled for now, let’s think about what we’re gonna do next!” Mutsuko broke in.

“But what should we do? Just get off the island?” Aiko asked.

They had originally come to the island for their training camp, but they were definitely in no condition to do that now.

“Good question,” Mutsuko said. “The best way to get out of here would be to call Akiko back...”

“But how do we get in contact with her?” Aiko asked. “They took our cell phones.”

They hadn’t had time to get their cell phones back during the escape.

“Let’s break into one of the houses and use their landline!” Mutsuko declared. “I memorized her phone number, so it’s all good!”

Maybe it was pointless to worry about breaking and entering on an island where everyone was out to kill them, but Aiko still felt a little guilty about the idea.

“Anyway, where’s Yu at a time like this?” Mutsuko wondered.

“What if... he really didn’t make it to the island?” Aiko asked worriedly. They still had no confirmation that Yuichi had made it to the island, after all.

“Yu, you say? Another of your allies?” Nero asked.

“My little brother,” Mutsuko said. “I pushed him into the ocean, so I knew he’d be a little late, but...”

“...Was he, by chance, with a woman?” the werewolf asked.

“Did you run into him somewhere?” Mutsuko asked.

“On my way to this island, I spotted a young man carrying a woman in the water,” he responded. “This island appeared to be his destination.”

“I see!” Mutsuko cried. “Which means he’s already on the island, I bet! We’ve gotta meet up with him!”

They decided to head for the harbor first. If Yuichi really had come, there would probably be some sign of him there.

*****

Natsuki was trembling.

Yuichi held her in his arms.

“I’m sorry. Let me stay this way a little while longer,” she said.

He’d never seen her like this. That “Head” thing must have really scared her. Which was only natural, Yuichi thought.

Still, they couldn’t stay like this forever. If it hadn’t "revived”

yet, they still had a chance. They had to meet up with Mutsuko and the others and get off the island while they still could.

"You want to go back, Takeuchi?" he asked.

"Ah?" Natsuki looked up at him, her eyes like those of a frightened child.

"From what they said down there, it sounded like our friends made it out," he said. "Which means they'll probably be heading for the harbor. So..."

"What will you do, then, Sakaki?" she asked.

"Konishi's been captured," he said. "I need to save her."

"Why?"

Natsuki's confusion was only natural. Yuichi had barely even spoken to Yuri Konishi in the past, and she had ambushed him once already. He had no obligation to save her, and doing so might even open him up to future attack.

Even so, Yuichi couldn't find it in him to just abandon her.

"My sister gave me this weird training that's made me more powerful than most people," he said. "I didn't do it for any particular reason... but as long as I have it, I want to use it to save people. To be useful to people. B-But it's not... you know... the 'great power, great responsibility' thing. I hate that stuff." Yuichi scratched his head, feeling awkward about saying the words out loud.

"...I'll go with you," Natsuki said. "I could be useful somehow. But I would advise against trying to stop that monster. What it is exceeds human understanding. It's like a hurricane or a tidal wave... It's not something you can fight."

Yuichi wondered if Natsuki had fought something like that before, but he didn't want to pry. She seemed so frightened. It suggested some terrible memory that she didn't want to relive.

"It's primarily a rescue mission, so we probably won't have to fight it," he assured her. Still, part of Yuichi's mind continued to consider it, turning over what little knowledge he had, trying to figure out a way to make the thing dead. "Well, for now, we need to find a way inside or we won't even be able to do that much."

Yuichi gently released Natsuki and looked around. He quickly spotted a crack large enough for a person to fit through.

Before they went inside, they decided to go back down the mountain and pick up any useful luggage they might need.

*****

There were anthromorphs waiting at the harbor, but they were no match for Nero.

His bestial strength was on a whole other level. The anthromorphs on this island were merely humans with fur; no matter how frightening they might look, they could do nothing in the face of a true monster.

Nero faithfully followed Aiko's "try not to kill them, if possible" request, but given the vast difference in power, it was a little beyond his control.

"*Dynasty Warriors: Nero!* And it's *so* easy mode!" Mutsuko cried, jumping around like an excitable child.

"Mutsuko, this is really not the time..." Aiko said, looking out over the harbor.

There wasn't a single boat docked there, though Aiko remembered there having been several when they'd arrived.

"Right. First, we need a way off the island, right? Natch!" Mutsuko searched the fallen anthromorphs' pockets and pulled out a radio and a cell phone. "No service on the cell phones. Landlines might not work either, then. It's probably microwave transmissions with the mainland, so they can easily cut it off from the control tower..."

Mutsuko continued murmuring to herself.

"Big Sis! Big Brother really did come here!" Yoriko exclaimed as she checked the luggage that had been left behind.

The others gathered around her.

There were signs that Yuichi and Natsuki had changed clothes. The clothing they had stripped off had been cast aside, and there was less clothing in the bags. The sight of the weights Yuichi had been wearing lying on the ground were the greatest proof of all.

"Okay, let's find a way to meet up and get out of here! We can't exactly hold a training camp like this, after all!" Mutsuko rooted around in their luggage and produced a cell phone.

"I thought you said cell phones wouldn't get through," Aiko objected. Indeed, she had only just said that a minute ago.

"Oh, yeah!" Mutsuko said. "But this is a satellite cell phone, so it works anywhere!"

"Am I the only one who thinks that's cheating?" Aiko demanded.

Mutsuko called up Akiko at the summer house and asked her to come get them. It was as easy as that.

"Okay, now that we have our way out, we've gotta find Yu," Mutsuko said. "Nero, can you trace his scent?"

"Does this bag belongs to your 'Yuichi'?" he asked. "Then I can." Nero immediately began following the scent.

Yuichi had apparently gone to the warehouse near the harbor, then headed into a local's house a little further away. Then, Nero said, they had gone off in some kind of vehicle, at which point he lost the scent.

"There was nothing in the warehouse, so let's try the residence!" Mutsuko proclaimed. She was now wearing a silver gauntlet on her left hand, which apparently served as both weapon and armor.

Aiko was carrying a projectile stun gun, though she had her doubts that it would work on an anthromorph.

"There's someone inside. Take care," the werewolf said.

"You're so handy to have around, Nero!" Mutsuko cried. "Hey, can we adopt you?"

Aiko and the others stopped in front of the row house. If Yuichi had stayed there for a while, it might contain a clue as to his current whereabouts.

The nameplate out front read "Takamichi." Mutsuko rang the front doorbell, and someone immediately came running.

"Yuichi!" the someone cried out as the door was burst open.

"'Yuichi'?" Yoriko's eyebrow twitched.

It was a woman's voice, too. Aiko had a bad feeling about this.

"Huh? Who're you guys?" the girl said, slumping in disappointment.

She appeared to be the same age as Aiko and the others. She had brown, slightly curly, medium-long hair, and was wearing a simple white camisole and dark blue jeans. The first thing Aiko noticed, though, was the size of her breasts. These seemed to be the biggest yet. Breasts that large inspired less a feeling of envy and more one of awe.

"We're the Seishin High School Survival Club!" Mutsuko announced.

"Um, Mutsuko, that's not a useful way of introducing us..." Aiko murmured.

“Oh! Are you Yuichi’s big sister?” the girl asked.

Somehow, Mutsuko’s thoughtless introduction had proven extremely efficient.

“Does that mean Yu really did come here?” Mutsuko wanted to know.

“Yeah. Wanna come in?”

The group accepted the girl’s invitation, and entered her house. Just to be safe, though, they asked Nero to stand guard outside.

They all sat down at a low table. The girl, Rion Takamichi, brought drinks and sat down across from them.

“Yuichi said he went off to save you guys. Did you miss each other?” Rion asked with a wince.

“Looks like it,” Mutsuko said. “Do you know where he went?”

“The festival site, probably. I told him it’s where they’d take sacrifices.”

“Hmm, what to do?” Mutsuko pondered. “If we go after him now, we might miss him again...”

The island was quite large. If they acted too haphazardly, there was a good chance they would pass each other by again.

“Why not stick around?” the girl suggested. “Yuichi told me that if the ritual started and you weren’t there, he’d come back here. We had a deal.”

“You’re awfully informal with him, aren’t you? Using his first name and everything...” Yoriko said, not trying to hide her irritation.

“Huh? What’s got you all pissy?” Rion snapped back. She must have found Yoriko’s attitude incomprehensible.

“Yoriko, you’re being very rude,” Aiko admonished her. Even so, Rion’s tone had set her on edge, too. The thought of her and Yuichi spending time together caused a twinge in her chest.

“So, what was this ‘deal’ you mentioned?” Aiko asked her, curiously.

“I didn’t want to be sacrificed, so I asked him to take me when he ran away,” Rion said. “One of those elopement kinda deals, y’know?”

“Ah! That’s simple, then,” Yoriko announced. “If you die before you’re sacrificed, that solves everything. Shall I help you?”

“What was that, brat?” Rion snapped. “I’m getting pretty sick of your crap!”

Aiko watched the two fight, disoriented.

Mutsuko sat the radio she had taken from the anthromorphs on the table. “Rather than sitting around here, it would be easier to meet up again if we keep moving, but left clues behind. I’ll leave this radio here, so if Yu comes, let him know, okay?”

“Sakaki went off in a car, right? Could we catch up to him on foot?” Aiko asked. While the island wasn’t very large, the festival site must be far enough away that he’d felt he needed a car.

“There are plenty of other cars!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“Could you please not propose stealing so casually...” Aiko murmured.

Mutsuko didn’t seem to feel any guilt about the thought at all. She hadn’t shown any compunctions about taking that radio before, either.

“It’s an emergency, so what choice do we have?” she asked. “The law makes allowances for emergency evacuations, too! It’s Article 37 of the penal code!”

It seemed to Aiko that she had to be careful about giving Mutsuko just causes like “emergency evacuation” and “legitimate self-defense.”

As they left Rion’s house, Aiko immediately noticed something amiss.

Nero was howling.

She didn’t need to ask why; she immediately realized what Nero was trying to warn them about.

It was a monster.

An enormous human face was looking down at them from above. It had the body of a quadruped, wings on its back, and a snake for a tale. It was a great golden beast of the sort you saw only in fiction, never reality.

Aiko’s legs had gone numb. She was finding it impossible to move in the face of its overwhelming presence.

“The Head of All...” Rion, who had come to see them off, whispered the words partly in terror.

“Oh? The Takamichi girl. I was sure you were dead.” The voice came from the monster’s feet, from what looked like a baboon dressed in Japanese clothing.

“Elder, um, this isn’t...” Rion was in a total panic. The baboon anthromorph must have been the island’s leader, Dogen Kukurizaka.

As for Mutsuko's reaction...

"Another incredible thing! A sphinx? A nue? A cherub? A lammasu? A manticore? A chimera? Well, whatever you are, Nero's got our back! Come on, Noro, don't be scared! This is where your white knight does his stuff! Okay, go on!"

As usual, she was fearless before the monster. She pointed right at it, left hand perched on her hip, and gave the order as if she was Nero's owner.

"Yes ma'am!" Nero dashed along the ground, as ordered.

The match seemed like it might end before Aiko could even react. Nero wasn't letting his guard down. The monster brandished its own claws, but Nero dodged through them to strike first with his own.

Nero's claws dug deep into the monster's flesh. The blow should have scattered the monster's brains on the pavement.

But that was not what happened. The claws stopped halfway, unable to continue or retract. They simply remained stuck where they were.

His claws — his arm itself — were merging with the monster.

"Your Highness! Please, ru—" Nero cried as he realized he had lost. But his words were cut off as the rest of his body was swiftly absorbed by the monster.

"Uh?" Mutsuko's voice leaked, dumbstruck, from her throat. But an instant later, she pointed her left hand back at the monster.

A disc flew forcefully from the gauntlet on her hand. It bounced uselessly off the monster's stubborn hide.

"Drat... I thought it was pretty powerful, but that thing's muscles are so thick it doesn't seem to do any damage," Mutsuko muttered. Her proud tool, the chakram shooter, had had no effect.

"Nero!" Aiko screamed in agony.

"Now, the festival hasn't even begun yet," Dogen said. "Could you sacrifices please remain quiet until we need you? Bring them."

At Dogen's order, more anthromorphs appeared.

"Hey! Why is the god walking around before its ritual of revival? That's against the rules!" Mutsuko shouted.

Even as she was being caught, Mutsuko continued to protest.

Chapter 8: The Evil God's Revival! The Prelude to Humanity's Destruction!

It slept.

It lived a life in eternal haze.

From time to time, it awakened, reminded of its body's incompleteness.

Broken, lost, gone.

Restoration would require great time and nourishment.

Time, it had. The mere loss of its body would not kill it.

But a failure to die was not the same as recovery.

Suitable nourishment did not exist in this world.

When it fell from the sky, only the most primitive of creatures existed here.

To absorb them in their present form would be difficult. It decided to change those creatures, little by little.

Little by little, it would urge them to evolve into life more compatible with itself.

Over the long passage of time, a suitable race was forged.

It began to absorb them, and after sufficient recovery, it concocted a new plan. It began to plant the seeds of intelligence into the creatures it had created.

Perhaps it could use them to return to the sky.

It urged their evolution towards further intelligence. The intelligence to develop technology, to sail into the sea of stars.

More time passed. It began to think of itself as God. For these beings had invented language and created their own myths, and in these myths, they called it "God."

It created worshipers to whom it was God. For as their creator, what else could it be?

The time between awakenings grew shorter. Consciousness now returned every few hours. Its body's recovery was complete.

That last nourishment, a mass of great power, had been the deciding element. It was stronger now than it had ever been, before the initial

loss.

The light of the moon.

That was all it needed now.

Then body and mind would unite.

Its existence in haze, it awaited the time of revival.

*****

Aiko and the others were in a palanquin.

It was decorated grandly, in an anachronistic style. If not for the situation they were in, it might have felt like aristocratic treatment. It was large enough that four of them could ride in it with room to spare.

The bamboo blinds at the front that served as the entrance were down. They weren't tied up, so escaping would be as easy as raising the blinds. But if they got out, they'd just find themselves in the middle of a group of alert anthromorphs, so it didn't seem worth trying.

The palanquin was swaying. They were being carried somewhere.

There were four girls trapped inside the palanquin. The three girls of the survival club: Mutsuko, Yoriko, and Aiko, and also Rion Takamichi.

They were all wearing diaphanous white under-kimonos — traditional "human sacrifice" clothing. It seemed sacrifices were to be treated well, even if they had tried to escape once; their captors didn't seem capable of roughing up future offerings to their god. Therefore, they hadn't been forcibly stripped, just encouraged to put the light white gowns on themselves.

Realizing it was pointless to try to fight it at this point, they had changed clothes obediently. Their original clothes were in the palanquin with them, but they weren't sure if they'd be allowed to change back.

"Do you think it's okay to keep our shoes on?" Aiko asked.

Aiko was wearing sneakers. Since it was originally going to be a survival camp, she'd brought clothes that were easy to move in.

Mutsuko was wearing short, hardy-looking lace-up boots. Aiko had a feeling they were rigged up somehow, too.

"They didn't tell us not to, so I don't see why not," Mutsuko answered. "These clothes are silk, right? They feel nice against my

skin! Maybe they don't mind us wearing shoes because it's gonna chomp us and leave our feet behind?"

"Don't say things like that, please..." Aiko felt sick just thinking about it.

After changing, they raised the bamboo blinds to see outside, and nobody scolded them for it. The palanquin had been taken into Kukurizaka's mansion.

Ahead of them were two water buffalo anthromorphs, bearing the palanquin on their shoulders. There were probably two more in the back. The palanquin was surrounded by anthromorphs that all seemed to be on high alert. There was probably no way to slip by them.

Aiko couldn't keep track of where they were going, but Mutsuko was probably memorizing the route. That would come in handy if they ever did get out, so Aiko felt a little relieved.

"But wow, this situation is seriously bad," Mutsuko commented.

"After all this, you finally think so, huh?" Aiko asked.

Despite her words, though, Mutsuko was acting more or less the same as always.

"Ahh! Darn it! If you guys hadn't come, this would never have happened!" Rion sulked. She must have thought she'd been out of the woods after meeting Yuichi.

"Even if we hadn't been captured, we'd all be in deep once that thing was up and walking around." Yoriko muttered back.

"Yeah... you've got a point..." Rion began quivering again as she remembered the sight of The Head of All.

"But what was it doing out and about?" Aiko asked. "That... Head of All, you called it?"

It was as if it had been waiting outside Rion's house. They didn't know how it had found them.

"Good question," Mutsuko said. "You think it was after Nero? It did fly off, looking pretty satisfied, after it absorbed him."

After doing that, the monster had flown off without giving them another look. It seemed logical to assume that it had been after Nero from the start.

"So it is you guys' fault! Darn it!" Rion complained again.

"But it might not be possible to get off the island without getting rid of The Head," Mutsuko responded. "I mean, it flies! You can't really run from that."

The thought of a monster like that pursuing them to the ends of

the earth sent a chill up Aiko's spine. There was no way to escape something like that.

"What are we going to do?" Aiko asked. "Rion, do you know anything?"

She didn't want to know what was going to happen, but just sitting there in silence made her anxious, too.

"You mean, what happens to the sacrifices?" Rion asked. "Some are like you just saw: they get absorbed into the body. But that's only for anthromorphs. Some are eaten whole. That's only for virgins. I don't know what's so special about how virgins taste, but it's been the rule since forever."

Which meant Rion could fall into either party. Since she was with Aiko and the others, though, she was apparently part of the "to be eaten" group.

"Offering virgins to gods is a custom all over the world, for some reason," Mutsuko commented. "Well, personally, I think it's because priests wanted to use their god as an excuse to get it on with some virgins. Then again, as a food source, women who have given birth probably have a different hormone balance, which might affect the flavor!"

"Are we gonna get eaten?" Aiko asked nervously. The Head's revival would take place when the full moon reached its summit. It had been evening when they were captured, which meant it could all be over in just a few hours.

I guess I really do have to transform...

Now that Nero was gone, Aiko's power was all they had to rely on. She probably couldn't beat that monster, but it might help them get away, at least. The only question was whether she could control it. The last time she had transformed, her body had moved on its own.

And then there'd been the other day, when she had wandered into Yuichi's room in a daze. If that had been an effect of the vampirization, then she definitely didn't have control over those powers.

"I personally think my big brother is going to come save us! Don't you agree, Noro?" Yoriko addressed Aiko casually, apparently believing that very firmly.

"Y-Yeah," Aiko said. Now that she mentioned it, they hadn't seen Yuichi for a while.

Maybe Sakaki really will come to save us...

Since she didn't know if she could use it or not, gambling on the vampire's power should be saved for a last resort.

Yuichi would come. She believed in that.

They were carried from the mansion into the basement, and then into a strangely-lit passageway. It was completely different from the Japanese-style mansion halls they had been in previously; a perfectly square corridor lit uniformly with dim light.

"What is this?" Aiko asked, dumbfounded, to no one in particular.

"This is the festival site," Rion answered. "Weird place, huh? Some people say it's like being in a spaceship, but..." Rion said that in a tone that suggested she didn't believe it.

"A spaceship! Maybe The Head of All is an alien! Of course! There are alien origin theories for plenty of yokai and gods!" Mutsuko looked around in great interest.

"Are there?" Aiko did find it plausible that this could be a spaceship. The technology certainly looked extraterrestrial.

From time to time, they came to a seeming dead end, in which a square hole opened automatically at their approach. It acted like an automatic door, except that it looked like an ordinary wall until they were right on top of it. She had never seen anything like this on Earth.

Speaking of which, Aiko realized, Yoriko had been very quiet this whole time. She decided to check how the girl was doing. Yoriko's face was pale, and she was cradling her right arm. She'd said she had the pain under control, but it seemed that had reached its limit.

"Yoriko, are you okay?" Aiko drew up close to Yoriko. She didn't know what to do except rub her back gently.

"Noro... thank you," Yoriko said.

Aiko had never seen Yoriko acting so reasonable before. The pain must have been getting really bad.

"Sakaki will come, I'm sure of it," Aiko assured her. "Then we can go back home together. It'll all be okay."

"Yes, Noro, I know that for a fact," Yoriko said. "You're the one who still doesn't believe it, aren't you?"

If Yoriko still had fight in her, she must have been feeling well enough.

They passed through wall after wall, until they came out in a

round chamber.

The first thing Aiko noticed within the chamber was that monster.

It was sitting upon the highest point of the room, a dais at the far side. It appeared to be curled up and asleep, yet it projected an overwhelming presence throughout the room that was impossible to ignore.

Three girls in under-kimonos crouched at the base of the dais.

They were surrounded by a crowd of anthromorphs, all inhuman beings with various animal features, looking up at The Head in reverence. The girls weren't restrained, but there was probably no way out of their current position, either.

Aiko's group was the same way.

The water buffalo anthromorphs brought the palanquin to the center of the room, then stopped, and set it down. The anthromorphs stepped away from the palanquin and pointed to the base of the dais. It's like they were telling them to go there.

"I know you! You're Sato, who lives across the street! Don't think you can get away with this!" Rion shouted back.

They must have known each other.

Perhaps he was the stoic type, or perhaps it was simply a rule, but the buffalo didn't say anything in response.

"Well, let's just do what they say for now." Mutsuko got out of the palanquin without complaint. "We've got front-row seats, in a way! We get to watch a god's revival close up! I mean, the fact that I saw it walking around earlier takes away from some of the excitement, but still!"

After a moment's hesitation, Aiko followed her.

They walked, single-file, through the crowd of anthromorphs. Their kimonos probably weren't see-through from a distance, but Aiko still hunched over as she walked, feeling self-conscious.

As they arrived at the base of the dais, Aiko started in shock. "Huh? Konishi?"

One of the girls present was Yuri Konishi, Aiko's classmate.

Yuri was one of the ones who captured them; why was she being treated as a sacrifice? The other two were Manaka and Akemi, the girls who had been in the prison with them before.

"Aiko Noro!" Yuri glared at her.

It was all baffling, but Aiko huddled down close beside her.

"Excuse me! Could you not sidle up to me?" Yuri snapped.

“If we stay pressed up together, they can’t see through our clothes.” Aiko continued trying to hide her body, embarrassed to be seen in the outfit.

“Are you an exhibitionist, then?” Yoriko asked. “You have that kind of face...”

Yoriko pressed up against Aiko as she sat down. Mutsuko and Rion followed suit.

“Why? Why is this happening to me? All I wanted to do was kill Aiko Noro and reign over my own world of darkness!” Yuri complained.

“I’m not sure how to respond to that...” Aiko said with a wince.

“So, you were double-crossed, right? How stupid do you have to be to trust people like this?” Yoriko snapped. Her tongue had grown a mark sharper, perhaps due to the severe pain she was in.

“Just calm down!” Mutsuko said. “Sniping at each other won’t help! Now that we’re here, we just have to wait for Yu to show up.” Even though they were on the verge of being sacrificed, Mutsuko seemed completely unaffected.

“Um... I do believe he’ll come... but with the outfits we’re wearing...” Aiko murmured. The fabric was flimsy and nearly transparent. The thought of Yuichi seeing her in it made Aiko feel even more embarrassed.

“He’ll come!” Mutsuko declared. “He’s probably already out there, just waiting for his turn! Planning the most dramatic entrance!”

“That’s one thing I hate about Sakaki...” Aiko muttered.

Their discussion was cut off as suddenly, everything went dark. The light from the walls and floor had gone out.

Immediately after, they found themselves bathed in soft light.

Aiko looked up at the ceiling to see that at some point, it had opened wide, allowing the light of the full moon to stream down on them.

The monstrous Head began to tremble.

It spread its eagle’s wings, stood up on its lion’s legs, fixed its man’s eyes on the moon, and let out a howl

.

“Oh, we’re all doomed!” Yuri scrambled her hands through her hair and wailed in despair.

Rion covered her ears and bowed her head.

Manaka and Akemi hugged each other, trembling.

"Reviving under the light of the full moon... you think it reacts to Blutz Waves? 17 million zenos?" Mutsuko pondered, casually.

"Big Sis, those are fictional terms. He's not turning into a Great Ape." Despite her casual criticism, Yoriko didn't sound at all surprised that Mutsuko had said it.

"How can you be so relaxed about this?" Aiko asked. She was dumbfounded... yet also, somehow, not surprised. It was certainly terrifying, and they were all probably about to die. But she had begun to realize this was the kind of thing that just happened when she hung out with Yuichi and his family.

The aura around The Head had changed now, too.

When they had met it at Rion's house, its eyes had been those of a wild animal. But now it was different. There was intelligence behind those eyes. The "revival" had been a mental one.

The Head took a step forward. It thrust its giant face towards Mutsuko. "You're not afraid, are you? You feel no awe towards me, nor are you my disciple."

Aiko was surprised to hear it speak. Despite the fact that it had a man's face, for some reason, she hadn't expected it to talk.

The Head then looked at Aiko and the others. It seemed to be watching them intently, curious.

"Why would I be afraid?"

"Aren't you afraid to die?"

"Sure, I'm afraid to die," Mutsuko responded. "But that's not happening here. You can't kill me!"

"Can't I?"

"Because — and I'm sorry to say this after your whole big revival thing — you're the one who's about to die." She hesitated. "Oh, wait, I guess I should ask... you're not planning to stay on this island peacefully, are you? Because if so, it's okay if you stay alive."

"What a stupid question," The Head said coldly. "How much food do you think there is on this island?"

By "food," the thing probably meant humans. There weren't many on the island at all.

Mutsuko sighed, with a theatrical air. "Boy, I wish you hadn't started talking! Final bosses always turn so small-scale the second they open their mouths."

"Is that all you have to say?" The Head demanded.

"Mutsuko, why are you getting it angry?!" Aiko looked at

Mutsuko in panic. She couldn't figure out why anyone would go out of their way to provoke a creature like that.

"I just think it's not very god-like to lose your cool that easily!" Mutsuko exclaimed. "You've gotta be more above this kind of stuff!"

The Head's face had gone utterly blank.

"Oh, well. I guess Yu'll have to handle the rest!" Mutsuko proclaimed.

"Hey! Don't rile him up and then throw him to me!"

Aiko turned at the sound of the familiar voice.

Yuichi was standing right behind her. Beside him was Natsuki, dressed in black, skintight leather.

The Head began to laugh. It guffawed.

"That explains your confidence... so this is the man you were relying upon? I've seen him spying on me from that corner this whole time. I thought he was searching for an escape route."

"Sakaki... were you *actually* waiting for the most dramatic entrance?" Aiko asked.

Then again, she could believe it. He was Mutsuko's little brother, after all.

"No way! I had stuff to take care of first."

Yuichi started walking straight to The Head.

"You take care of the girls," Yuichi added to Natsuki. Then he urged Mutsuko to step back, and stood face-to-face with The Head.

*****

It remembered this thing. They had met while it slumbered.

But that was all. This thing was nothing: a human, weak, lacking even the power of its disciples.

With but a single stroke, it could reduce any human to lifeless meat. That would be easy, but also boring.

Yes, it thought. It needed a way to drive the female who had confronted it into despair.

Death could come after.

It would tear into the sacrifices, sink the humans into an ocean of blood and viscera, and then take its time toying with them.

First, it would crush this male that the female relied on, the one standing before its eyes. If it crushed the male effortlessly, the

female would realize how foolish she had been.

The male merely stood there, unafraid, smiling with perfect confidence.

How irritating.

It would crush him with a single step.

It planted its left forefoot, and struck out with its right. It did not matter where it hit. It would end the male's life, regardless.

But its claws caught air.

The male had moved.

It was only after that point that it noticed something amiss in its own body, and it realized he had pivoted.

It could not tell immediately what had happened, but there was something long, narrow, and hard now buried in its body.

Pierced.

The male took one step closer, holding a long, metal something in both hands.

A spear? A primitive weapon, but practical enough to have lasted throughout all of human history.

At last, its mind registered what it had seen.

The male had dodged its claw swipe, and had taken one step forward while pivoting. As he had, the tip of the spear had wobbled wildly, making the thrust unstable and hard to predict.

But the moment the spear had pierced its chest, all rigidity had returned, focusing the entirety of the weapon's power into a single point.

"You..." It tried to speak, but realized it could no longer even control its own voice.

Its core had been pierced.

Questions ran through its mind.

Where had the spear come from? That had not been in the male's hands when he had first approached. Where could he have hidden something so long?

How had the male known the location of its core? The core was its central control point, and its weak point. It was well aware of that. That was why it did not keep its core in any one place, but moved it freely through its body.

Yet the lance had impaled its core. There had been no way for the male to know where its core was, yet he had impaled it with perfect precision.

The core that had kept its body united was beginning to lose its

grip. The flesh it had taken into itself and made its own began to escape its control.

A single, lethal blow.

*****

Yuichi confirmed that the blow was fatal, then he pulled the spear out and stepped back.

He kept the point of the spear pointed towards the monster's head, his posture cautious.

"That's a face with 'but how?!' written all over it..." he commented.

The monster was indeed frozen, with surprise written over its face.

"Well, I'll let Sis handle the explanation," he added.

Yuichi climbed up on top of the monster, still holding the spear.

"I killed this thing! If anyone's got a problem with that, you can climb up here and try me!" Yuichi howled as he brandished the spear.

The anthromorphs clearly did not have a problem with that. They had all fallen to their knees where they stood.

Even the island's chief, Dogen Kukurizaka, was groveling, powerlessly.

It was just as Rion had said: Anthromorphs instinctively served the strongest in the room. Which, Yuichi had decided, meant that the best way to resolve what was going on on the island was to defeat their god, The Head of All.

He jumped down again as he felt the surface beneath his feet begin to break apart.

The monster's form was changing. It writhed, then expanded, then split apart. All that was left behind was a mountain of anthromorphs.

"So it was made up of fused anthromorphs, huh?" Yuichi mused.

The core that Yuichi had struck must have been what was keeping them all held together. Now that it had stopped functioning, they had returned to their original forms.

"Um... what's going on here? I don't think I followed it at all..." Aiko said to Mutsuko, looking extremely confused.

"Okie-doke! Allow me to explain!" Mutsuko said cheerfully.

“First, Yu used the spear as an ‘anqi,’ a hidden weapon. It’s a fundamental martial arts technique for keeping your opponent from noticing your weapon until the very last second!”

“Huh? Um, but Sakaki was clearly holding the spear the whole time!” Aiko protested.

“From our point of view, sure. But he was holding it behind himself. The enemy was in front of him, so it couldn’t see it!”

Even if it hadn’t been able to see the weapon, there was a chance his opponent could have told there was something off about his balance. That was why it was important, in that technique, for the wielder to mask his center of gravity.

“Um, so where did he get the spear?” Aiko asked.

“That’s the beach umbrella we were using the other day! It’s an umbrella-spear! You remove the umbrella part, and it’s a liu he da qiang, 3.2 meters long, made from a special alloy! It’s super bendy, and really heavy!” Mutsuko proclaimed.

Yuichi had brought the spear as a weapon, and packed it away in the mini-truck when they had first headed to the festival site.

“After that, it was simple,” Mutsuko added. “Just strike the weak point! Well, as for how he did that, I think Yu had a hunch about what his opponent didn’t want him to do!”

A hunch.

That was a vague way of putting it, but it was the only way of expressing it. Yuichi had guessed its weak point via an instinct — on a hunch. He had been able to tell what his opponent didn’t want him to do through observation and intuition. He could unconsciously process all the information he’d taken in, then make a snap judgment based on that.

That was why Yuichi had spent so much time sizing up the monster, right until the very last instant. That was why he had remained hidden, watching.

“Of course, Yu can also tell what his opponent *does* want him to do!” Mutsuko added. “If he used that ability during sex, he’d be unstoppable!”

“Hey! That has nothing to do with anything right now!” Yuichi barked back at Mutsuko’s outrageous declaration.

Aiko was blushing, which just made things even more awkward.

“B-But wow, he took it out pretty easily, huh?” she said, perhaps trying to change the subject.

“Well, that’s how fights usually go,” Mutsuko said. “It’s a fundamental rule of combat: take your opponent out before they can muster their full strength!”

“Um, the fundamental rules of combat don’t sound very sporting…” Aiko murmured.

“Ah, but that’s what combat’s all about!” Mutsuko replied. “You’ve gotta take the upper hand, no matter what. Every traditional old fighting style has some techniques that are about fooling the opponent. I mean, of course they do! The point of martial arts is to beat the enemy, so you need ways to win even if you’re less powerful or skilled than them. That means using tricks, bluffs, anything you can bring to the table!”

“Hey, can we talk about that later?” Yuichi asked. “Let’s get out of here before these guys—”

“Big Brother!” Yoriko suddenly caught him in an embrace.

As Yuichi went through his usual ritual of prying her off, he realized that her right arm was injured. “Yori, what happened to your arm? Are you okay?”

“I’m not okay!” she cried. “I need TLC!”

“No, look, we need to get you to a hospital…”

“The boat’s on the way, so that’ll be easy enough,” Mutsuko said. “It’s probably already waiting for us at the harbor! And… hmm? What’s this?”

The spaceship seemed to be rumbling. The vibrations were small, at first, but they were starting to grow in severity.

“I see,” Mutsuko said. “I bet it’s that old cliché, you know? The whole place is about to collapse!”

“Huh? Why should it collapse because I killed the monster?!” Yuichi found the idea a bit ridiculous, but that didn’t change the fact that the ship was shaking.

“Okay! Yu, all of you, get out!” Mutsuko declared.

“What about you, Sis?” he asked. Mutsuko had encouraged them to run, but she didn’t seem about to follow them right away.

“I’ll catch up later! There’s something I’ve gotta do first!”

“Got it!” he agreed.

If Mutsuko said she’d be fine, she’d be fine. Yuichi grabbed Aiko and the others and started to run.

*****

Takashi Jonouchi awakened.

Ever since The Head of All had absorbed him, he had felt at peace, as if in a dream.

It had been a pleasant feeling. He had belonged there. It was as if he had become one with the entire world, with no separation between individual and whole.

He had shared thoughts with all kinds of existences, a single part of a larger something that could process great quantities of information at once.

And then, suddenly, that had all been ripped away.

It was disorienting. It took him time to remember that he was an individual named Takashi Jonouchi. But as he became aware of his surroundings, he realized he was in a pile of his fellow anthromorphs. He immediately recognized them as the others who had been absorbed into The Head of All.

And then, he realized that the ground was shaking. At first he thought it was a side effect of his disorientation, but it didn't go away.

"Ugh... what happened?" He was disgusted with himself. He had regained his anthromorph power, but now that meant nothing. His existence as an individual was small and meaningless, compared to being a part of The Head of All. "Dammit... I'm..."

What would he do now? Nothing at all came to mind. He looked up at the sky.

The full moon seemed to flicker in his vision.

...*Come...* the voice said. It felt like it was speaking directly into his mind.

Takashi looked in the direction it seemed to be coming from.

There, he saw something lying on the floor. It was a small head, like a baby's. It was looking at Takashi.

It is not... too late. Eat me...

The head that had fallen from the sky. The Head of All.

This is its true form, Takashi realized.

It was painful to see in this state, split like a pomegranate.

I shall give you power... tremendous power. I am going go to sleep... and while I sleep, my power shall be yours...

Takashi began to crawl towards it. He moved slowly. It was as if he was not yet in full control of his body.

Power...

Yes, power. Power was what he needed. Power even greater

than that of an anthromorph.

Yes... yes... come here...

Takashi found himself in front of the little head. He reached for it...

Splat.

And just like that, The Head of All was crushed.

Takashi stared dumbly at the ex-deity, at first uncertain of what he'd just seen.

The Head had been smashed under a sturdy-looking boot.

Takashi began to turn his eyes higher. Above the boot was a smooth, slender leg, and still higher, a girl dressed in a diaphanous white kimono.

"B-horror movie sequel foreshadowing? Not on *my* watch!" she proclaimed haughtily. "This ends here and now. No continuations, no spinoffs, and no side stories!"

Then she turned her eyes to Takashi.

"Same goes for you," the girl told him confidently. "You've gotta quit serving at the whim of other people all the time! Getting power from someone else doesn't mean anything. Listen up! You're a man, right? You've gotta earn your own power! Start training! Train and make yourself stronger!"

In that moment, to Takashi, she seemed to be shining.

"Who are you?" he asked, a feeling of reverence rising up inside of him.

"I'm Mutsuko Sakaki, second-year student at Seishin High School, and president of the survival club! Ah, just call me Flag Breaker Mutsuko! I thought that one up just now. Anyway, you ought to come away with the rest of us. You don't wanna get crushed inside an alien spaceship, right?"

Mutsuko held her hand out to him.

Takashi gripped it tightly.

*****

Yuichi and the others escaped the festival site, passed through the mansion, and made it outside.

Mutsuko joined them a little while afterward, with two wolf-like humanoids following after her.

"Who are they?" Yuichi asked.

"They're anthromorphs unaffiliated with the island, so we've

gotta take them away," she explained.

It was like she was saying the island anthromorphs could die, for all she cared. Mutsuko could be cold-hearted when it came to that kind of thing.

"Lady Aiko... forgive me!" One of the wolf-men walked up to Aiko and pressed his forehead to the ground.

"Um... it's okay, really. I mean, it wasn't your fault..." Aiko was clearly bewildered by this sudden prostration.

"But..." The wolf bowed even lower.

"This is getting really annoying. Why not just order him not to worry about it?" Yoriko said bluntly.

"Okay, then please don't worry about it. Just do your best from now on. That's an order." Aiko must have also been getting fed up with it, as she took Yoriko's suggestion immediately.

"Y-Yes ma'am!" The wolf-man's voice was choked with tears.

Yuichi had no idea what the relationship between Aiko and this wolf-man was. All he knew was that he'd been introduced as "Nero."

"Hey, is anyone else feeling that rumbling?" Rion asked nervously.

Yuichi could feel the ground shaking slightly.

"Don't tell me..." he groaned, his stomach twisting into a knot.

He turned and looked back past the mansion, to the mountain's summit high above.

There was a powerful blasting sound, followed by a shockwave. Red lava began flowing from the mountaintop.

"I see. Looks like the scale of things just got even bigger!" Mutsuko exclaimed.

The lava rock hardened in the open air, sending volcanic projectiles popping loudly into the sky above. If they stayed where they were, they'd quickly be caught up in the pyroclastic or lava flows.

"Oh, none of this makes any sense!" Yuri shouted in panic.

"Okay, everyone! Let's run for the harbor!" Mutsuko commanded gallantly.

From the boat's second floor rear deck, Yuichi watched the island sinking. "What the heck. This can't be happening..."

The ground they had been standing on just minutes before was now splitting apart and sinking under the ocean. It was a truly

unreal sight.

The volcano had continued to violently erupt, and then, as if unable to bear the strain any longer, it had begun to split apart.

“Maybe it had a self-destruct device!” Mutsuko mused cheerfully, standing to Yuichi’s right.

“Sakaki. I’m realizing for the first time just how small I really am,” Natsuki said listlessly, standing to his left.

The three of them were leaning against the railing on the deck. The others were down below. Yoriko was resting in a cabin, with Aiko looking after her. Nero was accompanying Aiko.

Yuichi had wanted to stay with Yoriko, too, at first. But she had been so insistent on getting coddled that he’d ended up retreating to the upper deck in disgust.

“This is crazy,” Yuichi muttered. “I never thought I’d see anything like this...”

“Now that I think about it... I wonder who was it that sent the letter to the Martial Arts Preservation Society,” Mutsuko mused.

They had been taken prisoner the moment they arrived on the island, so they hadn’t been able to meet whoever had sent the invitation.

“That’s right, I’d forgotten all about that...” Yuichi said. “Looking back now, it was pretty suspicious. I wonder if someone did that just to lure us there...”

But even if that was the case, who would want to set a trap for a bunch of ordinary high school students like them?

“Good question,” Mutsuko said. “Though if there really was a dying martial art there, it’s a sad loss...”

Mutsuko gazed off at the island, daydreaming, perhaps, of mysterious fighting styles.

Yuichi decided he’d had enough of watching the island sink, and turned back around. There were more people on the boat now than there had been on their trip there.

Takashi Jonouchi and Yuri Konishi.

The two girls who had been taken for sacrifice.

The cowgirl he’d met on the island, Rion Takamichi.

“What are we gonna do with all of them?” he asked.

Yuri Konishi shouldn’t pose any more trouble for them. She seemed to have lost her desire to attack Aiko.

But the college students might be a problem. They had come in a group of five, and three of them were missing. Now that the

island had sunk, there was little chance they might be found alive.

"We could just kill them and spare ourselves the trouble," Natsuki said. "If we did it now, we could just tell everyone they went down with the island."

"You're kidding... right?" Yuichi asked.

It didn't sound funny when a serial killer said it. The small smile on her face was no guarantee that it was a joke, either.

"They'll just have to go to the police and handle it through the usual legal channels!" Mutsuko said.

It might have been dismissive of her, but Yuichi felt the same way. He couldn't take responsibility for every single thing in every single incident he'd ever been involved in.

In Rion's case, though, he did feel some responsibility. He had promised to save her, after all.

"Takamichi said she was attending school off the island, so she'll probably be okay," Mutsuko said. "Oh, or do you want her to stay with us? It'll be like a roommate comedy! It's 'eat or be eaten' with a cowgirl roommate! Wouldn't that be novel?"

"Anything but that, please..." Yuichi already had his hands full living with his weird older sister. He didn't need anything more piled on top of that.

"By the way, Yu! You killed a god back there, right? Maybe we ought to start calling you God-Slayer Yuichi!" Mutsuko proposed with innocent enthusiasm.

"Was that thing really a god? Not just some weird creature?" he asked.

It had certainly been unspeakably powerful, but it had also looked like a mash-up of fairly common animals. It was hard to buy something like that as a god.

"I can't believe you were so calm in the face of it..." Natsuki said, her voice a mix of reverence and disbelief. At the ritual site, Natsuki had remained on backup duty. She hadn't even tried to approach The Head of All.

"Well, really, you can get god authorization anywhere!" Mutsuko said. "I mean, they used to use that word to refer to old kings and natural phenomena, so it's pretty reasonable that people would venerate that thing. You saw how gold and shiny it was! They probably thought they'd get something out of it!"

"At any rate, anything that's alive can be killed," Yuichi said. What he'd done wasn't special.

But Mutsuko's reaction to his offhanded comment wasn't what he was expecting. "Yu... you've become such a natural at condescension. It's kind of cool..." Her eyes became dewy, as if greatly touched.

"Huh? What the hell's that supposed to mean?" he demanded. "I'm not trying to sound cool..."

"Ah! Doesn't killing a god get you perks?" she asked, quickly changing topics. "Has it awakened new abilities within you? C'mon! Can you use the power of the god you killed or something?"

"Of course not!" he snapped. "And I don't want any more weird powers than I have already!" Just the thought of more unwelcome powers awakening within him made him feel slightly sick.

I'm not gonna undergo any weird changes... am I?

As Yuichi fell deep into thought, Mutsuko put a hand on his head and mussed his hair around.

"Hey, you're embarrassing me..."

"You did great this time, Yu!" she proclaimed. "I see you learned from the vampire incident and used your full power right off the bat! I give it an 8 out of 10!"

Mutsuko continued to tousle his hair with sisterly affection. Yuichi had to wonder where the two docked points came from, but he wasn't entirely displeased.

Epilogue: The Bookseller's Melancholy

It was a room full of books and bookshelves.

The bookshelves were lined up with no particular system to them, with great stacks of books piled up all over the floor.

Amidst them there was a faint light, and beneath it sat a girl reading a book.

She had long, red hair and wore an old-fashioned dress. Somehow, she gave an impression of a worn-out antique.

She sat atop a stack of books, flipping through the pages lightly.

Her name was Ende, and she called herself a bookseller.

Of course, her treatment of the books was a little too rough for her to be a real bookseller, but it was the stacks of unlimited books that made her what she was.

The further she read, the more her expression darkened. By the time she reached the last page, her face was completely frozen.

"How?" Ende gazed at the book in disbelief.

The page detailed Mutsuko and her gang's escape from the collapsing island, and then, their safe return home. This was not the ending she'd expected.

She had set the stage, even combining alien lifeforms and mythical creatures. Mutsuko should have died in the face of so overpowering a concept. The only valid resolution should have been the complete destruction of the entire party.

But that hadn't happened. The monster had been destroyed without ever revealing its full power, and even the foreshadowing for its return had been nipped in the bud. After all that, it could never return again.

It was impossible to overturn a story once told, or to force a development that completely defied logic. That was the unbreakable rule.

"Is Mutsuko Sakaki really that powerful?" Ende wondered.

She had twisted the story, forcing it to its least likely conclusion. Ende pondered for a time about what to do next.

At last, she concluded, "Never mind. It's such a pain..." and she

threw the book away. It sank into another mountain of books.

Really, it had just been about Soul Reader from the start. She'd decided to kill Mutsuko Sakaki because the girl got on her nerves, but it was nothing to get obsessed over. Quite the contrary: obsessing over it any further could be the true fatal mistake.

"It passed the time, at least," she breathed, aware that there was still a hint of strain in her tone. "But that Yuichi Sakaki... he's trouble, too."

All he was was physically strong, but that was what made him so dangerous. It was easy to bend logic when it came to hazy, abstract story concepts like magic and psychic powers. Such things could easily be wiped away.

But an opponent who simply trained, day after day, to become stronger, building a power with a foundation in one's own self-confidence... that was a hard type to crush.

"Well, Yuichi Sakaki's already mixed up with her, so maybe I'll just sit back and watch, for now," she said. "We'll wait and see... if my story and yours will ever cross again."

Ende grabbed a random book and began reading a new story.

*****

The day after returning from the island, they headed back home.

The trip took several hours, between the local buses and the bullet train, which meant the sun was already setting by the time Yuichi arrived back in Seishin.

There was something reassuring about the site of the old, familiar station. It felt like he was back to his everyday life.

"You're going to leave your injured little sister behind?!" Yoriko pouted when he said he was going to walk Aiko home.

"You've been treated, so now you just need rest," Yuichi told her. "Go back home and go to bed already, Yori."

Yoriko grumbled and complained, but he patted her on the head, and she sullenly did as she was told.

As they walked from the station area to the shopping district, the town was the picture of peace and quiet. The sinking of one tiny island, so far away, hadn't affected it at all.

"Though I still have no idea what happened back there..." Aiko said, looking puzzled.

“Me neither,” Yuichi said. “But maybe he knows something about it?”

Yuichi pointed down, at the wolf striding proudly between the two of them. It was Nero.

They’d known that if a werewolf showed up in town, it would cause a huge panic, so Aiko had asked him if there was anything he could do about it. As a result, he had transformed into this shape.

A wolf-man who had been the size of a large human had become the size of a dog. It was physically impossible, any way you looked at it. But it suggested, once again, that common sense didn’t apply to creatures like him.

“There is no need for you to accompany her as long as I am here, you know…” Nero suggested.

“By the way, you probably shouldn’t talk,” Yuichi said. “You never know when someone might be listening.”

The “wolfdog” form they could explain away, at least. But if anyone saw him talking, they’d really be in trouble.

“Do not worry,” Nero assured him. “‘The dog is talking’ is not the first conclusion most people will draw.”

“I guess not, but still…”

It was true that people would typically interpret the things they saw to match up with what they knew to be possible. Almost anyone observing the scene would just assume the conversation was between Yuichi and Aiko.

“I am not the type to consider these things very deeply,” Nero said. “It seems that is how I ended up manipulated by that woman.”

That woman.

Yuri Konishi had made reference to a mysterious woman, as well. Apparently the mysterious woman had thought up nearly all of Yuri’s plan for her.

“You think she was after Noro?” Yuichi asked.

“I am uncertain,” Nero said. “The way she spoke did not suggest it…”

“But we made it safely off the island, so I guess it doesn’t matter,” Yuichi said. In that regard, maybe he was being too optimistic, but he just couldn’t be bothered to think about these things that hard.

“Lady Aiko asked me not to speak of things that do not concern her current life, but…” After a period of silence, Nero spoke up uncertainly.

“What is it?” Yuichi prompted him. He had a bad feeling about this.

“Because it may prove a great threat to Lady Aiko’s way of life, I wish to tell her...” Nero gave Aiko a questioning look.

“Does this have something to do with the princess stuff?” Aiko sighed. After a moment’s thought, she added, “...Well, if it’s dangerous, I guess you’d better tell me either way...”

“Including myself, Lady Aiko, you have twelve retainers,” Nero explained. “Of them, three lost your favor and were cast out...”

“Yeah, I had a feeling I wouldn’t get it...” Aiko said with a wince.

This sounded like something Mutsuko would like to hear, Yuichi thought. A princess of darkness, retainers swearing their loyalty to her... It was all extremely middle school.

“Of course, I do not believe they would bring you any harm, but their affection for you *is* excessive,” Nero continued. “Those who put your well-being above all will not care what happens to anyone except for you. To be quite honest, I do not know how they might react if they met you now, but they could pose a threat to your current way of life. And to Yuichi, especially. He might be the first one targeted.”

“Well, I’m not too worried about anything coming after me,” Yuichi said. It was hard for him to understand why he might be targeted, but if he was the only one they were after, he could probably handle it.

“Naturally, I am certain you can handle yourself,” Nero agreed. He seemed to acknowledge Yuichi as a superior. He had his memories from the time he was fused with The Head of All, and the fact that Yuichi had been able to defeat it had given Nero a high opinion of him.

“I’m not worried about Sakaki, either... but what should we do?” Aiko asked.

“We’ll just have to be on the lookout, that’s all,” Yuichi replied. “I’ll be with you during school, and Nero will be with you at home, so that should cover all the bases.”

“Ah, I do have a dog, so I hope you’ll get along with him, Nero,” Aiko said. “He’s a Shetland Sheepdog named Marion.”

“A dog, you say?” The thought of being lumped in with a dog seemed to hurt Nero’s pride, and he turned his gaze downward. But it only lasted for a second before he snapped his attention forward

again, to something in front of them.

Yuichi's gaze was drawn to the same thing.

It was a girl, standing in the middle of the throng.

She wore a white blouse, a bowtie, and a dark blue skirt; it was probably an elementary school uniform. She had a dainty build and a ponytail, held in place with a scrunchie, that accented her features very well.

She was quite a pretty young girl, but aside from that, there was nothing unnatural about her. So why did Yuichi feel so unsettled when he looked at her?

There was something different about this girl.

Then suddenly, he realized it.

She didn't have a label.

He had gotten used to seeing labels above everyone's heads, but the air above her was blank.

The girl was craning her head around, as if searching for something.

Their eyes met.

The girl brightened with joy, then an instant later, she puffed up with anger.

She barged up into Yuichi's personal space. "There you are! Hey! Give Soul Reader back! I'm gonna be in big trouble without it!"

He had no idea what she was talking about, but it was clear that it was the start of another bizarre incident.

It seemed Yuichi's unusual summer vacation wasn't over just yet.

Afterword

Thanks to your support, we've reached the third volume. I owe it to all the readers who bought the last two books. Thank you very much.

I'm the type of person who reads the afterword first, so I don't want to write too much about what happens in this volume, but I also don't want to be too random, so now I'm stuck. As a reasonable compromise, how about a story of the trials and tribulations of writing this book?

Well, I really had to rack my brain to figure out the subtitle. I nearly didn't come up with it in time. I always think them up after I finish writing the whole story, but maybe that's the wrong way to go about it?

Hmm, I still have more pages to fill. I guess it's time to talk about the day I met a ninja.

It closed a while back, but there used to be an amusement park in Shiga Prefecture called Lake Biwa Tower.

There was a ninja mansion in the amusement park that had been moved there from a real ninja village (I forget if it was Iga or Koga).

There was a ninja there.

You might be thinking, "Of course there would be a ninja in a ninja mansion," but usually, there aren't. You just walk around the mansions looking at the various tricks they set up.

I just happened to be there when the ninja were there — they charged an extra ninja fee, those stingy jerks — and I got to see the ninja.

What's that, you ask? Am I sure it wasn't just someone dressed as a ninja as part of a show?

Yes, I'm sure. I asked him.

"Being a ninja is my only job," he said.

I think if being a ninja is his only job, and he can make a living that way, then he must be a pretty good ninja.

The guide lady was showing us around the mansion, when

suddenly, an evil ninja gang attacked the tour group, and the professional ninja drove them off. It made for a fun action show, and we got to see the ninja throw his shuriken.

The shuriken pierced through some upright tatami mats, and the visitors tried to pull them out, but they were so deeply embedded that it was impossible.

"Is this ninjutsu?!" I asked him.

"I just have strong shoulders," he replied.

So it wasn't ninjutsu?!

"I went to the Koshien championships with these," he went on.

Stop being a ninja and go play baseball!

So, um, that has nothing to do with *My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World* — although maybe it does, a little — so let's move on to the special thanks.

To my editor. I'm sorry I caused you a lot of trouble this time, once again. Since I was this bad even on volume 3, it's probably not going to get any better...

And to my illustrator, An2A. Thanks for doing wonderful illustrations once again.

Now, then. I've already started work on the fourth volume, so I hope it gets released soon! But, you know, I'm just happy I get to keep writing it. I'm happy, but I wonder if I'll ever have time to rest...

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World: Humanitiy's Extinction Happens During Summer Vacation?!
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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